Pressure Points

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Pressure Points

by shiphitsthefan

Summary

Though Hannibal had imagined many paths toward winning Will over and awakening his hidden monster, facilitating his recovery from a brutal abduction and hours-long gang rape never once entered his manipulative equations. Mason's revenge for the impregnation of his sister was exacting, and Hannibal knows Will's suffering was nothing more than a dig at himself, no matter what Will believes. Nevertheless, the games between he and Will continue, a wound that festers as much as it heals.

Neither of them have earned each other's trust, but Will has certainly earned his pound of flesh, and Hannibal will see him have it, no matter the personal cost.

Notes

A year ago, I needed to read a fic like this. Since it didn't exist, I wrote it. My goal was to depict a realistic rape recovery and all the horror and redemption and acceptance that comes along for the ride, especially when set in the frame of *Hannibal.*

Special thanks to Team Beta: victorine (chapters one through three); aerialiste (chapters one through five); llewcie (chapters one through six); and lecterisms (full fic). I had the absolute pleasure of working with embulalia—she truly blessed us with amazing art! MHBB was the first big bang I'd ever participated in, and I couldn't have asked for a better experience or a better partner. To each of you, I owe awe. <3

This story was written as catharsis during a dark time, and I hope it helps other survivors and allies as it has helped me.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

Help me

That's all the middle-of-the-night text message from an unknown number says.

Who is this?

Me

Will

Hannibal's heart races. Has Will gone too deep into his double agency? Would Jack put Will in danger simply to snare Hannibal? Worse still, is Will playing on Hannibal's emotions, having discovered they exist?

What is the matter?

Mason

God Hannibal please help me

I dont know what to do and everything hurts

Hannibal's blood slows to a sludge in his veins; his fingers tap on his knee, restless. There's no way to be certain that this isn't a deception without hearing him—Hannibal knows the sound of Will's distress. He presses the button, listens to the beep of the autodial, and switches it to speaker.

"Hannibal." His voice is so small and hurt, a nasal pitch, roughened with tears. "I need you."

"What's happened?"

Will's breath shakes, a gust of dampened wind against the phone. "I was leaving class. To go to classes, I mean, the classes I teach. The academy—I was going there."

"You were at home?" Hannibal asks. Will only hums. "Where are you now?"

"Somewhere between my house and—and Muskrat. I don't know, maybe a back road, I couldn't—oh God, I couldn't see out."

"I'll find you." Hannibal's been on more complicated hunts, and never for so important a quarry. "Are you hurt?"

"He—in the back of the van and they—maybe I'm bleeding, I haven't been able to check. I don't...Christ, I really don't want to find out."

Hannibal takes a deep, steadying breath. This isn't the time to plan a mass murder. "Can you describe your surroundings? It's fine if you cannot."

"There's woods. I'm lying naked in a ditch," and he trails off into a bubble of semi-hysterical laughter.

“Tell me about your dogs.” If any subject can distract Will, it would be that. But Will's still hiccuping, lost in trauma. Hannibal needs to calm him down before he hyperventilates or, worse, draws attention to himself. “They’re more loyal to you than any human could be. Your pack was waiting for you when you came home. They’re waiting for you now.”

“It's past time for me to feed them. Way past time.”

“And what were you serving tonight?”

“Beef. Beef and rice,” says Will. “I threw it in the crock pot before I left.”

Hannibal tries to determine which of his clothes are softest, then which of those are warmest, then realizes he hasn’t responded. “How lucky they are to have such a considerate master.”

“I think I killed someone on my way out of the van.”

Hannibal's heart stutters. “Why do you say that?”

“There's...I'm kind of blocking it out, or trying to, but when I found the ditch I—” His breath hitches again, and there's a small grunt of pain. “I was checking to make sure I still had all of my teeth and there was meat in my mouth.”

“Your assumption is a good one, then.”

“But I jumped out the back when the chance came,” continues Will, “and I just...I started running, and I didn't stop until I found the road again, and then I *only* stopped because I couldn't run anymore.” Will sounds less frantic, though there's still a distinct terror wrapped around each word.

“Are you sufficiently camouflaged?”

Will laughs; it’s a minor miracle. “Burrowed under the mud and the leaves. Had a panic attack. Then I texted you with the phone I took off with.” His breath shakes in the speaker again. “I think I broke something when I landed.”

“It's extremely likely.” Hannibal rifles through his linen closet, pulling out towels and blankets, shoving them in the bag alongside the pajamas. He tries to picture the most likely area given the scant information. Perhaps along the shoulder of—“Is there a rail nearby? Beside you?”

“Yeah, I think—” The rustle of leaves crackles from the phone; Hannibal uses his free hand to pull medical supplies out of the bathroom cabinets. “There is,” Will confirms.

“Thank you. You're doing very well.” Hannibal lays the phone on the counter so as to squash the contents of his bag, trying to make it all fit. “Will, I'm going to make a quick stop at my office for my prescription pad, and another at my pharmacy. Can you do something for me?”

“I don’t—” Will's inhale is more like the sound of an inflating tire, shallow, harsh. “Maybe?”

“Do you recall the breathing exercises I attempted to teach you?”

Will chuckles ruefully. “I'm not exactly up for remembering the time you made me spend in the loony bin, Dr. Lecter.”

“Then think of somewhere safe,” says Hannibal. “Picture yourself there. Stay as calm as you can.”

“And you'll be here soon?”

Hannibal feels an atrial iceberg melt. “Yes. I'll be there soon.”

His preferred twenty-four hour pharmacist comments on Hannibal's pajamas, slippers, and robe. “A very dear patient in an urgent situation,” he explains, and the woman fills the prescription for nitrate ointment and liquid oxycodone without question. She knows Hannibal’s a psychiatrist, not a physician; she also knows he doesn't charge her husband for his therapy.

Hannibal doesn't think as he drives, because if he lets his mind free to roam, he might end up wondering what condition he'll find Will in. His phone hasn't rung or beeped once since they ended their call. For a few seconds, Hannibal wishes he'd left Will in the hospital. If nothing else, he was safe there. But the time Hannibal spent without him was a precious waste; now, with Jack sailing along behind, Will seems determined to return the ruin Hannibal dealt.

It would be so easy to simply leave Will on the side of the road, or to lovingly kill him when he arrives. It's also entirely unconscionable. Hannibal can't imagine a worthwhile life without Will kept somewhere in it.

The curves of the road seem endless, and each identical to the next. Hannibal drives slower and slower, glad for the lack of traffic, high beams on. If not for the light, he would have missed the blood on the guard rail.

Will.

Hannibal's car parked itself for all he knows, considering how quickly he's out of it and off the road. His slippers get stuck in the mud, so he leaves them behind to pick up after Will's safe in the car. The wet dirt and leaves cling to his feet, matting between his toes. Were it any other night errand, Hannibal would be revolted.

He shrugs his robe off, in case Will needs it, though it's difficult to tell. Will is sprawled in the mud, the wet leaves stuck to his body. From a distance, no one would see him; close up, he looks dead, a nude corpse buried inexpertly, ready to sprout and nurture the wilder of the beasts.

Hannibal stops himself from calling out his name, uncertain if it would be triggering. Still, he doesn't want to potentially sneak up on him.

“Mongoose,” slips from Hannibal’s mouth like a prayer.

Will’s voice is broken as he says, “Hannibal.”

He’s there in an instant, the mud nothing to trudge through, falling to his knees beside Will, narrowly avoiding what looks to be vomit. “I’m here,” Hannibal tells him. It seems stupid to add, but Hannibal does, if only for himself: “I found you.”

Will looks up at him, up at the bridge of Hannibal’s nose, his face bloody and bruised and smeared with dirt. Hannibal both praises and curses his excellent night vision, because it’s so difficult to see

Will like this, to see the ghosts of hands around his throat and even darker shadows along his ribs. But he only takes a moment to look Will over; there will be time to care for his wounds once he is safe.

“I have a robe for you,” Hannibal says. “Can you stand?”

“It’s…” Will grimaces, and Hannibal is silently shocked, that someone’s stoicism should so greatly match his own. “Give me your arm?”

“You may have both, should you wish.”

He makes eye contact, like a wild animal caught in a trap. “I’m hardly that hungry.”

Hannibal doesn’t think he could love Will more than he does in this moment. Will smiles a little, like he had in Hannibal’s office after Margot admitted to bedding him under false pretenses—

It occurs to Hannibal that this could be his fault, though the results have all been, thus far, enormously unexpected. Even so, try as he might, Hannibal’s hands shake as he holds out his arms. Will hesitates, then creeps forward on his knees and falls into Hannibal’s embrace, hands gripping the lapels of Hannibal’s silk pajamas.

“I’m going to put my arms under yours so as to support you while you stand.”

Will is still looking at him, scrutinizing. His face relaxes, and he nods slightly. “Hannibal,” he says, masking the harsh cry in his voice.

“Yes?”

“I know what you did. It doesn’t take a scientist to figure out you sent Margot to me in your roundabout way. But this isn’t your blame to take.” He hisses, but catches a rogue tear on Hannibal's cheek. “Just—just trust me on this, before I start freaking out again, okay?”

In spite of all of Will’s scheming with Jack, the lies he’s told to Hannibal and, worse, to his own self, Hannibal does. “I apologize for my runaway emotions,” he says. “I meant no insult to you.”

“None take—oh *fuck,* that hurts.”

“Your ribs?”

“Yeah,” confirms Will, “but mostly...other places.” He hangs his head. “I’m really tired,” Will says, voice trembling, “and it...I don’t think I can stand up any further.”

Hannibal is going to kill them all.

“Hold onto my neck. Let’s at least get you warm.” He gingerly maneuvers the robe over Will’s shoulders, but Will shouts all the same.

“Carpet,” he says through clenched teeth. “It burns, it *burned,* oh God.” Will begins quietly babbling at the ground.

“This will hurt,” warns Hannibal, “but we need to leave, and I need to cover our tracks.”

“I don’t care, get me out of here, they can’t find—”

“They won’t. Take a breath,” and Hannibal lifts him in his arms, sloshing back through the mud to the nondescript beige sedan, Will crying out into his shoulder. It takes some quick calculating, but he figures out how to get Will into the back of the car on his side, facing the seats. Adjusting the front seats forward, Hannibal crawls into the floorboard, closes the door, and maneuvers to kneel behind Will’s head.

The compulsion to console and comfort him is terrifying.

Hannibal pulls his bag from the front seat; he knows Will swallows aspirin dry, but he has to be thirsty. The plastic band of the water bottle echoes in the quiet car. He begins to open the oral solution of oxycodone to mix into the water, then stops. Not even he is calculating enough to drug Will unaware right now.

“I have pain medication, should you want it.”

Will waits too long for Hannibal’s taste before answering. “No drugs. It’s—it’s hard enough being in the back of a car, I don’t...I can’t…” Hannibal thinks Will might still be talking, but he can’t make out what he’s saying.

He licks his dry lips. “A sip of water, then?” His own voice sounds strangely timid to his own ears. Maybe he *is* timid. Hannibal hardly understands his own feelings anymore. “I have a straw.”

Will’s matted curls move as he nods, so Hannibal makes it work, the straw in backwards, the longest part to Will’s mouth, and it makes Hannibal ill, his mind wandering to what might have happened to Will last night, to what other lengths he took. But Will pushes the straw out of his mouth after a few sips, saving Hannibal from his own imagination.

“There are clothes for you,” says Hannibal, though he’s not sure how they’ll put them on. “Pajamas. Underwear.” Will nods again, and Hannibal does his best to pull the briefs over Will’s legs without jostling him too much; when he slips them over his ass, Will whimpers, once, and then falls quiet. He does again when Hannibal settles the pajama pants over his hips, bringing a hand up to cover his face. Hannibal does him the courtesy of not commenting.

“Thank you,” Will says from behind his hand.

“Think nothing of it.”

“I know you have to drive, but I don’t want you to leave me back here.” Will’s voice cracks halfway through the sentence, but he seems like he’s thinking more clearly, panicking a little less, if only for the moment.

Hannibal can’t stand it any longer, the urge to lay a healing hand on him. “If I were to touch your head—”

“God, *please.”*

He settles back in behind Will, then dumps some of the water into his hand first, wetting his palm and fingers, and slowly begins to comb his fingers through Will’s hair. Ironic, that he’s wanted to do this since that sacred night in the stables, and should only be doing so now. Will’s breath stutters, but eases quickly.

“I was going to take you home with me,” says Hannibal, trying to avoid a snag. “I thought it might be preferable, considering. You needn’t worry for your pack; I have a favor I can call in for someone to check on them.”

“That would be...I’m not really keen on going back to my house.”

“As I thought.” Will leans his head back slightly into Hannibal’s hand. “Would it be better to sleep on the drive?”

Will’s shoulders shake, like he’s attempting to laugh. “I don’t think that’s possible.”

“I could help you,” Hannibal says, “if you’d like.”

Another long pause; Hannibal gently works out a tangle. “I shouldn’t trust you,” Will slowly replies.

“Neither of us have earned it of each other.” Hannibal waits for Will to read between the lines, to piece out that Hannibal knows, yet he came for Will, anyway.

Will nearly whispers, “I suppose we haven’t.”

“Please.” Such a strange night, to have both apologized and pled. “Let me help you rest.”

“Okay.” His answer is immediate, steadfast and decisive. He sounds almost like the Will who left Frederick triumphant.

“I’m going to take your hand,” begins Hannibal, and he does, though his legs are beginning to prick uncomfortably beneath him. They hardly matter. He circles Will’s forearm lightly with his other hand, fingers wrapped around—“It’s alright. I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I know, it’s just...just keep going.”

“Modern medicine tends to view many alternative and traditional treatments with unwarranted disdain,” Hannibal starts again, keeping his tone low and soothing. “Acupressure and massage are both effective therapies, even though the success of such treatment may be due to a placebo response.” He puts his thumb on the inside of Will’s forearm and pushes in, beginning to rub in slow circles. “The Chinese call this nei guan. It is a pressure point located along the pericardium median—PC 6. Stimulation here is purported to help alleviate insomnia, and studies have tested it as an antiemetic, but come up empty-handed. Quackery, they say, yet I have always found it calming.”

“I did throw up.”

“Very understandable.” Hannibal runs his thumb back and forth between the current point and the next, tendons like a road to and from the hand. “You’ve survived a great trauma.”

Will scoffs. “More like ‘rescued from’.”

“You’re hardly a damsel in distress, dear boy.” Hannibal tenses; he hadn’t meant to say it. A terrible first time for such a personal nickname.

There’s the barest hint of mirth to Will’s words when he says, “You’d have fared better. No survivors.”

“You’re still learning,” says Hannibal. “Also there’s no telling whether or not I would have reacted differently due to experience and, primarily, luck.” He steals a moment away from Will’s skin to pull a twig out of his hair. “Never compare yourself to anyone but yourself.”

Will turns to look up over his shoulder as much as he is able. “Bedelia told me you thought you were helping me.”

Hannibal pulls his hand back, moving on to the pressure point at Will’s wrist. “I’m not sure this is the time for such a conversation.”

“It’s the *—ah!”* Will’s face screws up in pain as he twists over too far. “It’s the only time. Here,” he says, teeth grating. “Now.”

“If you must insist.”

“Oh, I must. If nothing else, distract me. Make me angry for another reason, Hannibal, tell me it’s all been worth it, that...please.” His breathing is growing labored again as he begins to topple into anxiety.

“I did it for all of us.” Hannibal starts to stroke his hair again. “Despite my methods, my perceived cruelty, I have only ever intended to help. It may be difficult to understand, but—”

“The trial.” Will’s eyes close; he’s shivering. “The judge, that was when I knew. I *knew,* Hannibal, even though Mason told me in the van that you didn’t care, that you gave me to him, but I knew and I *know* because here you are and—and—”

Great, racking sobs, and Hannibal half expects to look out the rear window and see Abel Gideon standing there. “I would never,” he says, because Hannibal’s not sure exactly how to respond, but he is deadly certain he would never engineer such an ordeal for Will. “Never this,” and that feels more honest. “Never him.”

“Help me,” and they’re back staring at each other between the bars of an asylum cage. “Hannibal, make them go *away.”*

Hannibal moves his hand back to the inside of Will’s wrist, thumb at the edge, a direct line from his little finger. He gives it the same treatment, encouraging Will to lie back down on his side, leaning over him as best he can in the cramped space. “Listen to my voice,” Hannibal says. “It’s only us here, W—”

“Not my name, don’t say my name,” and Will’s words rattle and run together. Hannibal had hoped to be wrong, but of course Mason would keep it personal. His lifetime of torturing Margot is testament to that. “You—what you said before, outside—”

“Mongoose.” Hannibal likes the way it rolls off of his tongue, too. “A remembrance of our first meal together.” His lips are as close to the shell of Will’s ear as he dares, trying to avoid Will’s back, trusting his hands to be competent with neither sight nor supervision. “But I gave the metaphor thought before bringing you breakfast,” he continues. “I went home after our first meeting, took your file from Jack, and you fascinated me.” He rubs his thumb in tight, even-pressured circles. “You still fascinate me, my mongoose.”

Will nods, his voice strung out. “Yours. Not his.”

“Yes,” says Hannibal. “Only mine.”

“What are you doing to me?”

Hannibal swallows. Had Will asked that of his assailants? He is unaccustomed to the revulsion that seems to have settled in his gut. “This is shen men. HT7. Pressure here relieves anxious thoughts and returns the body’s energy to normal levels.” Whether it actually does so or not, Will’s muscles are easing beneath Hannibal’s fingers.

“Sounds like the four humors.”

“Are you experiencing an excessive amount of black bile?”

Will shrugs. “I’m currently experiencing an excessive amount of everything, Dr. Lecter.”

“Such as pain?” asks Hannibal softly.

“I keep flipping between numb and excruciating. Like my body isn’t always mine. The control to the television is broken, that sort of thing. It’s why I didn’t call you at first,” Will tells him. “I couldn’t figure out what exactly was wrong, and then it all hit me at once.”

“Disorientation is normal. Bewilderment. An inability to keep your thoughts in order. Shock affects each of us differently.” Hannibal moves his thumb back to the first pressure point. “Tell me if my touch becomes uncomfortable.”

“No, it’s...it’s good.” Will’s arm is growing heavy in Hannibal’s hands. “It’s helping. I didn’t think it would after…” He shakes his head. “I can’t even talk about it. I don’t even know where to *start* talking about it, but your...your hands. The night I killed Randall. Perjuring yourself. On my face and the blanket around my shoulders, except there’s no hidden games, except for mine.” The agitation grows in his voice. “I didn’t want—I don’t want—I just want it all to stop. I say ‘no’ but no one listens, not even you...”

“I hear you now,” but Will is lost to scattered muttering once more. Hannibal keeps cycling from point to point, just as he’s done to himself, until Will finally, fitfully falls asleep.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> Art included in this chapter is also posted in (what should be) a mobile-friendly size in the end notes!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There is no way to get Will from the back of the car without waking him, so Hannibal tries to do so as gently as possible. Will doesn't say anything, only acknowledges that Hannibal is there, a strong steady hand on the back of his head. Hannibal decides they should try going the opposite direction, out the driver's side passenger door, letting Will push himself out with his feet until Hannibal can support him the rest of the way, as though Will has truly been reborn into his arms.

He asks soundlessly to be held, tipping his face into Hannibal's neck, slumping against his chest. Hannibal embraces him, being mindful of his bare back as the robe slips off, pressing his cheek against Will's temple.

"Do you want me to carry you?" asks Hannibal. "It is no trouble." But Will shakes his head, though he does lean against Hannibal as they slowly make their way inside. He breathes with difficulty, obviously trying to hold himself together more than he had when they made their way from the ditch to the car. "No need to muffle yourself. You won't be heard in here."

Will laughs, once, mostly a wheeze. "There was a time that knowledge wouldn't have made me feel better," he says. "I think it was yesterday."

Hannibal keeps Will upright when he loses his footing on the cement floor. He curses himself for forgetting shoes for Will, never mind his own slippers, left behind in the mud. Forgetfulness is alien enough; twice in as many hours nears impossibility.

"All I mean is that you don't have to be brave in front of me," Hannibal tells him, "whether you are or not. Which, for the record, you are."

"Don't much feel like it. Hannibal?"

"Yes?" He hefts Will the half inch over the threshold.

"Is this a dumbwaiter?"

"I've always found it particularly intelligent, myself." Hannibal helps Will lean against the wall, glancing at his face, pleased to see the tiniest smirk. The doors slide shut, and Hannibal pulls the rope to lower them down. "This is my greatest secret."

"What, that you can operate a pulley?"

Hannibal glances back at him. "My second greatest secret, then: these tunnels."

“So this is the family entrance as opposed to the front door for company?”

“No one will see you enter the house this way.” *And you will always be family.*

The dumbwaiter settles onto the brick harder than Hannibal had hoped; he has the pulley rope to steady himself with, but Hannibal’s unaccustomed to the presence of another living person in the car with him. Will tumbles to the floor, landing on his hands and knees, and completely freezes. It had been so disturbingly easy for a moment to forget why Will was actually here with him. Hannibal bites his tongue before he says Will’s name, and catches himself before he kneels on the floor with him, and is completely baffled to discover that he has *no idea what to do*.

“I’m going to open the door,” says Hannibal, “and then I’m joining you on the floor. Nod if you can hear me.” Will does, so Hannibal does, and now he’s back to strict improvisation. Running on emotional autopilot seems the best and only solution. For the first time, Hannibal wishes he had Will’s empathy. “I need your implicit trust right now.”

“Hannibal, I can’t breathe, why can’t I breathe?”

“You’re having an anxiety attack. It’s going to be alright, but you must trust that I am myself, and that I will not hurt you.”

“But you have.” That same high voice that haunts Hannibal’s sleep on the nights he allows it to.

“Yes,” Hannibal says, moving forward cautiously, “and you have hurt me, and I am coming to you and trusting that you won’t hurt me now.”

“I still want to kill you.”

“I know.” Another inch. “Perhaps you would wait until you are well, however?”

Will flicks his eyes up to Hannibal’s face—perhaps his cheekbones. “Okay.”

Hannibal forces himself to smile naturally, to break his hard-won composure. “Can you give me your hand?” he asks.

“I can’t, I’m sorry, please—”

“That’s alright. I almost have you.” The ache in his chest is unbearable. Hannibal’s loved Will since he opened his file, but he was never solid as to how deep that love went, and it’s a depth he never knew he was capable of until he saw Will lying in the mud. “I have you,” Hannibal says, and the creeping feeling of near-loss adheres to his spine.

“This shouldn’t—I’m not *there,* but it’s—this place is so *small.”* Will’s arms are beginning to shake, elbows locked too long. Easing himself to sit, Hannibal scoots over to Will as closely as he can.

“I’m going to touch you,” he tells Will. “You’re safe here. You’re with me. Snake and Mongoose, under the porch, and no one else.” Will lets Hannibal pull him to sit in the V of his open legs, though Will makes a strangled sound when his ass hits the floor. “Lean forward a little—that’s good, yes,” and Hannibal begins to unbutton his own pajama shirt. “Deep breaths.”

“Why are you undressing?”

Hannibal shushes Will as he begins to spiral down toward panic again. “I’m giving you my shirt. Nothing to fear.” He lets it fall off of his shoulders, then reaches behind him to grab it. “Clothes are how we protect ourselves,” says Hannibal, slipping one sleeve carefully up Will’s arm. The bruising on his wrists and forearms sicken him; Hannibal likely made it worse with his pressure point exercise, but the bruises hadn’t been noticeable underneath the dirt.

Will nods, hissing as the fabric hits his back. “You’re protecting me.”

“No. You are allowing me to protect you.”

“Agency.” Beneath Hannibal’s hands, Will is beginning to relax again. “You’re very good at this. Talking me down, I mean.”

Hannibal thinks for a moment that he should admit to his own quiet flashbacks, that they should commiserate their respective miseries. The moment passes.

“Shall I button it?” he asks, instead. They both know it will have to come off again for Hannibal to dress his wounds, but the offer feels significant.

Much to Hannibal’s surprise, Will gingerly leans back against him, the side of his head against Hannibal's neck. “Leave it,” says Will. “I'm feeling...not better, but at least I know where I am.” His breath is tremulous. “It happened so fast.”

Hannibal knows better than to ask what.

“So quiet. The dogs—I heard them inside the house, they barked and howled, and then—” Will's hand flies up to his neck, like he's shielding himself. “There was this sting—it was hardly anything, at all—and I looked up,” and Will stares at the ceiling of the dumbwaiter. “The sun was so bright, and I thought, ‘Death shouldn't be so blinding.’ I woke up and was very much alive.” He swallows before adding, “It was almost a disappointment.”

“How long?” Hannibal can’t stop the question, running on curious instinct and impulse. “I apologize; you don’t have to answer.”

“They just drove,” Will murmurs. “‘This is where Margot crashed. Would you like to get out?’ And then kept driving, until we stopped, rotated—‘I wonder if he even knows you’re gone. I wonder if he cares.’” Will grabs Hannibal’s hand, squeezes it until his nails cut into Hannibal’s skin. “‘We have all day, Will. Do you?’ Stop. Rotate. ‘You ruined her. Do you feel ruined yet?’”

Hannibal closes his eyes. There won’t be anything left for the pigs to eat when he’s finished.

“You’ll be more comfortable upstairs.”. In truth, so would Hannibal.

Will hugs Hannibal’s hand to his chest. “Thank you for not making the obvious suggestion.”

“That you should contact the police?” Will hums a yes; it tickles Hannibal’s throat like a bad cold. “I think we both know how that would end.”

“And how will *this* end?”

Hannibal closes the scant distance between his head and the top of Will’s. “I think we both know that, too.”

As much pain as Will is in, Hannibal easily acquiesces to his request to bathe alone. It makes him grit his teeth, because he wants to care for him in all respects, but Will understandably desires privacy. Hannibal helps him as far as the door, leaving it cracked open in case Will needs him, then heads back down to the tunnels and out to the car to get his forgotten bag.

None of this makes *sense.*

Not that he wouldn't have put it past Mason, already a rapist of preposterous degree. A more logical choice for the exorcism of his rage, however, would have been Hannibal. He might be stronger than Will, but any beast can be felled by a well-placed needle. Mason and his gang of cowards could have easily subdued him.

Hannibal sits down in the passenger seat of his car with no memory of getting to it. This would be an ideal time for grief and anguish—only Will and his concerns seem to conjure such responses. His slip-up earlier was unacceptable enough.

If this is Mason's revenge for Margot's pregnancy, for Will's unwilling insemination of her, for Hannibal setting up the chain of events which led to…

Wind up. Watch go.

"Hannibal. I know what you did. But this isn't your blame to take."

His forehead finds his hands, elbows drawn to his knees. He has only ever done what was necessary for Will, for the two of them, the *three* of them. Will fights him at every turn, and it's the most beautiful dance Hannibal has ever been part of. It would be an honor to duel him forever.

Will has paid enough for their safety—more than his fair share, though he was the only one who could pay the cost. But no longer. Hannibal wants vengeance, and he wants blood, and he wants to watch Will reshape himself.

He allows himself a few minutes more of pity, then grabs the bag, and heads back through the tunnels to the house, quick strides down forgotten paths at least a hundred years old, up the dumbwaiter he installed himself. The chilled air of his basement helps Hannibal bolster his nerves and steel himself for whatever he may find in the guest bath. Hannibal's rarely used it in all the time he's lived here.

The shower's running, which he wasn't expecting, and Hannibal knows he should knock first, but he's pushing the door open, into the bright steel and cream of the bathroom.

"Oh, Mongoose."

Will sits under the showerhead, knees hugged to his chest, still wearing his underwear, water beating down on him. His eyes meet Hannibal's, and he can't decide if there's panic, or anger, or some strange longing within them. It seems to be in constant flux, the color of his irises, like an oncoming storm, a tempest that was supposed to be in Hannibal's bathtub.

He stretches his hand out toward Hannibal. “I decided I want your help,” Will says. “I don’t want to face this alone.”

Hannibal’s breathing is even, but only out of practice. He helps Will back to his feet, wondering what on *earth* he was thinking. His mind is no longer his own; perhaps this is how Will felt under Hannibal's care, behind lock and key. The loathing for him seems more logical now.

Will’s chest is warm against Hannibal’s own, water still dripping down from his hair, following along the lines of his body like streams to the source. Another crime of Mason’s: to taint their first time like this, skin to skin, heartbeat against thudding hope.

“Shall I run you a bath?” His lips are so close to Will’s ear as to invite panic.

“Please.”

Hannibal leaves him leaning against the wall, holding onto the towel bar. He shuts off the shower, perfunctory as opposed to his fussiness with the faucet handles of the tub.

“Can I go ahead and get in?”

“If you like.” Hannibal wants to glance up, but it feels inappropriate, even though he’s about to see Will unclothed. There’s a difference between naked and nude; Will should be afforded the decision of either.

A struggling inhale behind him. “For the love of God, Hannibal, *look at me.”*

Hannibal pauses, the only sound the rushing of tepid water from the faucet. He doesn’t stand, simply pivots on his feet, one arm braced along the edge of the tub.

Prepared for the worst, Hannibal looks.

It’s so much worse than he’d prepared for.

The bruising around Will’s throat is a deep red, a perfect outline of large, heavy hands, thumb tips at the hinges of his jaw. It’s a straight line of bruise down the sternocleidomastoid on each side, palms at the base, fingers wrapped around to the back. There’s a second pair of hands, a different size, heels against the clavicle, thumbs horrifically close to the center of Will’s neck. One set to choke; one to hold down.

His shoulders didn’t escape the same treatment, eight fingerprints on each side, dripping down toward the floor. Hannibal knows that if Will turns around, there will be thumbprints along the scapulas. He wonders if the same angry red welts litter his back just as they do his chest and stomach, or if the boot-inflicted bruises on Will’s rib cage decorate the canvas on either side of his spine beneath the carpet burns.

Cuts on his wrists from too-tight zip ties; a fist to the face and eye; hands circling his hips, thumbs beneath the borrowed boxers, and Hannibal can only imagine what hides beneath the cotton.

He understands now, Mason’s choice. It wasn’t about exercising power, or in breaking Will’s body and spirit. Mason has countered Hannibal’s decision to put Will back into their war games.

“Here is your favorite piece,” Mason says. “Play him again if you dare.”

Hannibal treated Will as a pawn to sacrifice instead of a king to protect without truly realizing it, and *that* is unforgivable. He is very much to blame, regardless of what Will thinks.

Will's eyes bore into Hannibal's, challenging, defiant. "Stop it." Before Hannibal can respond, Will continues, "I told you this wasn't your fault. I can see you thinking it—you aren't so hidden anymore, at least, not to me. I should've known I was still expendable—"

"No!" Will looks as surprised at Hannibal's outburst as Hannibal feels. "I miscalculated. Misjudged, I didn't…" Hannibal sighs, turns off the water, and pushes himself up to stand. "You have never been expendable, Will. Not once."

"You'll understand if I find that difficult to believe," Will says quietly. His hand twitches at his side, aborted movements like he longs to cover himself.

"Of course."

He smiles, but it's more of an anguished stretch. "I look terrible, don't I?"

"'What is to give light must endure burning.'"

"Is that why I keep catching on fire?"

Hannibal reaches out to Will, glad when that same agitated hand meets his own. "'Suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning.' Also Frankl." He pulls Will carefully back against him. "When we find an act meaningless, the weight—fairly or not—is upon us to either attribute meaning *to* it or derive meaning *from* it. It does nothing to alleviate the trauma, but the ability to react in such a way is to realize that, in spite of violence, we still bear the choice of our own responses to that same violence." Hannibal tentatively touches Will's cheek, heartened when Will doesn't push away. "Our scars remind us of our freedom to discover the purpose for carrying them."

"I had a feeling you'd reflect better than a mirror." Will's hand presses over Hannibal's heart. "I feel so scattered, though. Is being scattered a choice? Because I can't think of a way to avoid how I'm feeling, or how I'm going to feel in the morning, or next week, or—"

"Breathe, Will."

"God, what am I going to tell people?" His heart rate steadily increases beneath Hannibal's checking fingers. "What am I going to tell *Jack?"*

"Tell him the truth," says Hannibal, and Will's pulse beats even more restlessly. "Which is to say, tell him that your double life has taken a physical toll, so you are taking some personal time." Hannibal rests his forehead against Will's. "You need to be at your best to catch me, after all."

"I don't want to catch you anymore," Will whispers, words forced out, his angled breath hitting Hannibal's skin.

"Yet you already have." Hannibal covers Will's hand with his own, gratified when Will leans into him further, as though Hannibal is his only support in the world. It isn't untrue. "Let me help you step into the tub."

“I haven’t…” Will ducks his head to Hannibal’s shoulder again, face nestled into Hannibal’s neck. “Underwear.”

“You can leave them on for now, if you like.”

Will’s nose rubs against Hannibal’s skin as he shakes his head. “No, I—we’re going to have to take them off anyway and—” His voice becomes garbled, but Hannibal finally makes out, “You do it.”

The task is a delicate one, considering Hannibal still has no idea what condition Will is in beneath the cotton. Just putting his thumb under the waistband makes Will shudder against him, but Hannibal keeps going, steady, sure. Hesitating will only make Will’s humiliation greater, he thinks, a reminder of his moments of weakness, as Will is surely interpreting the events.

No, Hannibal reminds himself, *his assault. His rape.* Using obfuscating language would be injurious, too.

“There we are,” says Hannibal as the elastic waist clears his ass, slipping down Will’s thighs and onto the floor. Will takes a deep breath, then steps out of them.

“I have a strange request.”

“Yes?”

Will licks his lips; the tip of his tongue grazes Hannibal’s neck. “Would you undress, too? I mean, you practically are now, but it’s just that they kept their clothes on, and...it would just make me feel better.”

“A physical reminder of our equal footing.”

“Something like that.”

Hannibal brings his hand between them, so careful not to touch Will, untying the drawstring of his pants and letting them fall to the floor. He’s never let them pool on the ground, as far as he can recall. It irks him, but there are exponentially greater things with which to be concerned.

“Thanks. I feel like I’ve said that a lot tonight.”

“It’s unnecessary,” Hannibal tells him, “but appreciated nonetheless. Watch your footing.”

Will flicks his eyes up at him as they both manage to get him sitting in the bathtub, though he grimaces, free hand gripping the opposite side of the tub, knuckles tight. “No little duck-shaped rubber treads for you?”

“I fear not.” Hannibal kneels in the floor again and turns the water back on. “We’ll likely need to run several subsequent baths for you to remove all of the dirt and debris. The cool water will help with the pain of your burn, as well.”

“How bad is it?” asks Will, following Hannibal’s guide to lean forward. “Because it hurts like hell.”

“There is broken skin,” says Hannibal, “and the wounds are not clean. The water should flush it out. I anticipate minimal blistering, since most of the damage is superficial. The bandaging for your bruised ribs should be sufficient coverage.”

Will hums in acknowledgment, then hisses as the first cupped handful of water trickles down his back. After the fourth pass, he draws his legs up to his chest, hugging them and laying the side of his face on his knees. Hannibal rinses the burns for the tenth time, and Will finally sighs in what sounds like relief.

“Better?”

“You’re so careful with me,” Will says. “It’s maddening, that you should be this way after all you’ve put me through. That you could be gentle.” Will arches slightly into the next rinse, and Hannibal is quietly furious as to why they’re here, but moved that he’s allowed to walk with Will through the aftermath.

“I’ve asked much of you.” Hannibal keeps his voice level—Will has no need to know of Hannibal’s fury. Not yet. “I would see you repaid for it.”

Will turns suddenly, water splashing in the bath, disturbed and displaced. He takes Hannibal’s face between his hands, and he kisses him, mouths mashed together, desperate and eager and entirely unexpected. Hannibal has no chance to react in kind, is only frozen and unresponsive, though his heart beats as though he’s hunting. Will breaks the kiss with a sound like a sob, breaking upon broken, and turns away once more.

“I shouldn’t have done that.”

“No,” Hannibal says. He shifts to better see Will’s face, reaching out to hold his left cheek in the palm of his hand. “You should have done this,” and Hannibal leans over the tub and brings their mouths back together.

This kiss is just as passionate as the first, but measured and soft. Will falls into it like a starving man, and Hannibal supposes that he is. The pervasive worry that this is too much, too soon after Will’s assault won’t stop shaking him, which shakes Hannibal in other ways, as he is hardly a person to be shaken. Looking back, Hannibal doesn’t recognize the person who deemed Will sacrificial.

“I am sorry,” he whispers between kisses, but Will only shakes his head.

“So am I.” One of Will’s hands finds its way to Hannibal’s hair, and Hannibal allows himself a moment to be disgusted by his gratitude for Will’s ordeal, for this outcome, then melts back into the comfort they’re giving each other.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 3

Will refuses to let go of him, even after Hannibal joins him in the tub in an attempt to find a more comfortable position to sit in. Hannibal has no complaints, though he did have to move away for a few seconds to find a clean cup as it quickly became apparent he was no longer going to be able to reach Will's back with handfuls of water. Now, Will has one arm draped over Hannibal's shoulder, hand hanging down his back, the other still around his knees. His forehead rests on Hannibal's other shoulder, except for when he holds his head up and silently begs to be kissed.

It's horribly endearing.

"I worry that this is merely a response to your trauma," he finally admits as the second bath drains out. "Not that your feelings aren't genuine; I only want this not to be tainted by Mason's cruelty."

"Hannibal," begins Will, voice echoing quietly off the bathtub, "this is the nicest I've felt since yesterday morning. Please shut up and let me enjoy it."

"There is my mongoose." Hannibal turns the water back on for the third time. "Are you cold?"

"A little, but my back doesn't feel like it's on fire, so it's a fair trade." He'd tensed when Hannibal stopped pouring the cool water over his back, but begins to relax again as Hannibal wets his fingers beneath the running water and runs his hand through Will's hair. "I don't want to panic again, but it seems somewhat inevitable, considering...well."

"That I have to examine you?" Will nods against Hannibal's shoulder. "The oxycodone is still an option."

"You asked me to stay with you once," he replies. "I'd rather stay with you again."

"Brave boy." Hannibal kisses the back of his head, plugs the drain again, and lets the tub fill. The water rises slowly, and Hannibal spends most of the time waiting for it shamelessly nuzzling Will's hair. "Forgive me," he murmurs, "I simply find that now that I am allowed to touch—"

"I forgive you for waiting so long." Before Hannibal can respond, Will says, "My brain is starting to buzz. Maybe this was too soon, like you said. There's—it's like an anxiousness fluttering in my chest, and the better my back feels, the more I remember how much it hurt before."

Hannibal swallows. "We'll make this the last rinse, then."

"I don't regret kissing you, no matter how much it itches under my skin right now."

He doesn't let the bath fill up as much as before, only enough to pour over Will's back. There will be time for soap later, when they come back in the morning for warm water, for another juxtaposed reminder of what they've gained and lost all at once.

Will finally lets Hannibal medicate him, a low dose of alprazolam to calm him in lieu of pain medicine. They stand in the doorway of the bathroom for what seems like hours, waiting for Will to remember how to breathe, Hannibal listening to Will's muttering revisit to his rape.

"I never said stop," he says, top of his head pressed into the center of Hannibal's chest, like the futile adrenaline-laced efforts of a dying bull. "Why didn't I tell them to stop? I didn't say anything, I just took—I mean I did fight back, at first, and then again and again and again until I couldn't any more."

Hannibal strokes down Will's arms, his hands planted against the door on either side of Hannibal's head. "A natural response to continued assault," Hannibal tells him. "You did nothing wrong."

"I know that," snaps Will, emotional pendulum swinging wildly. "When do the drugs start working, Hannibal? Will it be before my heart beats its way up my throat—" A sudden choking sob. "Oh God. I need a toothbrush, do you have a toothbrush?"

"Upstairs."

"Is it Alana's?" Will's laugh is bitter, sardonic. "I wouldn't put it past you, giving me hers."

Hannibal closes his eyes and takes a deep, steady breath. *This isn't a personal attack,* he reminds himself. *This is a common psychological reaction. Lashing out is understandable.* It's especially difficult to remember after the intimacy they shared moments ago, but Hannibal manages compartmentalization, as he always does when it comes to Will.

"No," he says levelly, "it is not hers. I do not allow her to keep her things here."

"I've never been the other woman before."

"And you aren't now."

Will scoffs. "How can you say that after you cheated on her with me just now? After taking advantage of my weakness—and I must be, since everyone keeps trying to do so and succeeding."

"I cheated on *you* with *her."* Will looks up at that, slowly, wincing as he moves. "I have only done wrong by you."

He deflates, and Hannibal has to support Will as his knees buckle. "It's not—I don't mean—"

Hannibal shushes him, "I know. Let me help you upstairs?" Will nods, and they painstakingly make their way up the staircase. When they have to stop at the landing before Will collapses entirely, Hannibal manages to convince Will to let him carry him the rest of the way, bruised pride or not.

"I've never been piggybacked by a serial-killing cannibal before," says Will. There's a slight giggle to his words; Hannibal assumes the alprazolam has kicked in.

"Feeling better?"

"Not really, no. But I don't seem to care as much about feeling like dog shit."

Will doesn't seem to mind Hannibal nearly dropping him when they make it to his room, either. He's light on his feet, even encumbered, even exhausted as he is, but there isn't an elegant way to

put Will down while trying to avoid any further injury to his already battered frame. Hannibal stays long enough to see that Will makes it onto the bed, then pops into the en suite.

“Toothbrush?” Will asks hopefully.

“Yes.”

“How’m I gonna get there?”

Hannibal allows himself a small smile—Will’s slurred words evoke much more pleasant memories. “I’ll bring a cup.”

Will snorts. “Can’t believe Dr. Lecter keeps little plastic Dixie cups like the rest of us plebes.”

“They’re ceramic.”

“‘Course they are.”

The plastic wrapper of the toothbrush crinkles on the tray, breaking the relative stillness of the room. Will’s lying on his side on the edge of the bed, and holds out his hand as soon as Hannibal comes out of the en suite. It’s complex, trying to figure out how to brush his teeth lying down, but they manage, and Hannibal leaves everything but the tray balanced on top of the headboard.

“Now I know you’re worried,” says Will. “Y’aren’t being persnickety.”

“Persnickety?”

But Will doesn’t cater to Hannibal’s amusement. “Appreciate it, though. Don’t wanna have extra time to think about it. Not when you’re gonna poke around.”

Hannibal pushes Will’s wet hair out of his face. It’s already started to dry, though still a bit tacky from the dirt that didn’t wash out. “Speaking of.”

“The devil? Thought that was you.”

“Will you be alright on your stomach?”

He tenses beneath Hannibal’s fingers. “Yeah, I...yeah.”

Hannibal tries to make him as comfortable as possible. He puts a pillow beneath his hips, not about to ask him to get on his knees, no matter how much easier it would make the examination. The forgot their pajamas downstairs, so Hannibal pulls a soft throw over Will’s back—Will grabs the edge of it immediately, curling it around his arm, balled up in his fist, pulled up to his nose. The alprazolam has relaxed his muscles, at least; Hannibal hopes it will be over quickly.

“Would you prefer that I talk you through it?”

“No,” Will says immediately, followed with, “Tell me ‘bout Abigail.”

Hannibal puts his glove on as quietly as possible. “What would you like me to tell you?”

“Make me mad at you. Tell me how she died.”

“I…” Hannibal unscrews the top from the medical-grade lubricant as opposed to flipping the cap. “Will, I am incapable of doing that.”

He makes a strangled sigh that sounds worse than any noise he’s made so far. “Tell me, Hannibal. For the love of God, just *tell me.”*

“Tomorrow.”

“Now.” Will wipes his nose on the blanket; Hannibal bites his tongue to keep from commenting.

“I will explain things to you in the morning,” says Hannibal. “I promise. For now, I need you to relax again, Mongoose.”

Will turns his head as much as he can, glancing back at Hannibal sitting between his legs. He’s nothing but eyes and forehead and slightly curly hair; Hannibal can see now that some of it is missing in patches, surprised he hadn’t noticed before. “I hated that, at first,” Will tells him, stirring Hannibal out of murderous thoughts. “Mongoose. When you said it over breakfast; when you fed me Cassie Boyle.”

The corner of Hannibal’s mouth twitches up. “I find myself very fond of her in death, seeing as she brought us to each other.”

“Our first date?” Will’s brow wrinkles.

“If you like.” Hannibal places a hand on the juncture of Will’s thigh and ass, stomach curdling at Will’s sharp intake of breath. “I’m going to start.”

Will nods, eyes scrunched shut, cheek falling back to lie on the pillow. “Don’t go through the steps,” he says. “I know ‘em. Cop at Mardi Gras, y’know? Just talk t’ me.”

“Are you aware that the explicitly erotic depictions of Leda and her swan were preferable to showing the same acts between a man and a woman?” Hannibal decides to move quickly; perfunctorily; clinically. There is no pleasure in this.

“Bestiality was bett—better?” He shudders, and Hannibal frees one hand to stroke down his back. “I’m okay,” Will whispers, very clearly not.

“Think of it as a form of society-regulated censorship.” Hannibal attempts to avoid one of the worse bruises with his other fingers, but to no avail, and Will jumps as Hannibal’s thumb presses into an ugly purple one. “Much as Japanese pornography is…” He trails off, suddenly realizing the subject of his artistic tangent is unbearably ill-timed. “Where did you take your mind, earlier this evening?” Hannibal asks, instead.

“My—fuck, my stream, but I need to stay here.” He pulls the blanket further up over his face. “Abigail’s at the stream. I can’t, Hannibal, it was fine before, but now—”

Hannibal rubs the small of Will’s back. “Then here we are again, beneath the porch. Is there a specific spot you have in mind?” Will shakes his head—or rather, shakes the blanket. “Let us build one together.”

“Where?” Will’s voice is muffled nearly to silence. It sends chills down Hannibal’s spine. More answers to coax out of him, in time.

“In India,” he begins, “the temples have outdoor halls—mandapas. They are analogous to what we consider a porch here.” Hannibal finds a second fissure. “You may think of it also as a kind of pavilion, though I much prefer those with tall columns, such as all the great civilizations have erected.”

“You would be that stuck up, to think columns equal—oh, God, no.”

Hannibal freezes. “What’s wrong?”

“I've got an—Hannibal, I'm *hard,”* and the shame oozes from his voice, a tangible, horrid congealment of words.

“Another normal physical reaction.” He moves his hand from Will's back to his side, stroking down his flank, encouraging him to relax again. “Nothing more than nerves and blood.”

“Happened a few times in the van.” Will turns his face into the pillow as Hannibal finds a third and fourth injury. “I know, Hannibal, I *know* that it's just spontaneous, but...”

“It is much different to have truly first-hand experience,” Hannibal says as he withdraws his finger.

“This isn’t how I wanted to be with you.”

Hannibal’s chest feels tight; he can’t decide which room to save this moment in, if it is horrible or beautiful, Will’s admission. “It won’t be,” says Hannibal softly. He finally looks down at his hand, enraged at the small amount of blood. It isn’t anything to be truly worried about—Hannibal knows it will heal. This isn’t his first post-rape examination, having worked in the emergency room. But this is Will’s blood, and no one but they two should be allowed to draw it.

“A traditional mandapa is used for rituals and celebrations,” Hannibal begins again. Will’s shoulder blades drop back down. He rolls the glove slowly down his hand, soundlessly, then reaches for a clean one. “I think ours would be better used for recovery, relaxation. Somewhere open to fresh air and expanses of grass.” Hannibal takes the rinse bottle off the tray. “This will be unpleasant,” he warns, “but necessary to apply the cream—”

“Christ Almighty, Hannibal, just *do it.”*

Hannibal does. “If you would please make additions to our porch as I work.”

“A swing,” says Will quickly, flinching slightly. “One of those old wooden swings with the chains that creak no matter how much you oil ‘em. The kind you’d sit on all day if somebody’d let you.”

“I’ve never experienced one.” Hannibal pulls the gauze away, flips the glove up and over the syringe, taking it off of his hand and covering the small bottle at the same time. “We’re almost through. You’ve done extremely well.”

Will laughs breathlessly. “Gotta good doctor.”

He can’t help the swell of pride—Hannibal can smell it on himself, wonders if Will’s empathy is strong enough to pick up on it, or if the alprazolam has subdued it, too. “What else would you like in our hideaway?”

“All your rape exams this romantic, Dr. Lecter?”

The air grows heavy and thick like a tornado rests mere moments away. It's the first time Will has said the word.

Hannibal leans up and puts his palm between Will's shoulder blades. They breathe; they part; they move on.

"Knives."

The new glove is suffocating on Hannibal's hand. "At the mandapa?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Will takes the blanket off of his face for the first time since the examination started. His eyes are crusted with salt, his upper lip covered in dried mucus. Hannibal hadn't known—Will was so quiet, and Hannibal's mind tangents off into questions and wondering and agonizing mental imagery.

"I've seen your blood in my dreams," Will says. "Suits you."

"I thought you wanted to use your hands." Hannibal applies the nitrate ointment with the utmost care. Gall rises in his throat when he's slapped with the vision of Will writhing on his fingers beneath him. He's going to drown in guilt if he doesn't reel in his self-control, and Hannibal realizes for the first time how truly afraid he is.

Will's eyes close. "If I use my hands, you won't survive."

"Even in our memory palace?"

His smile hurts Hannibal's mouth. "'Specially there."

"I would bleed for you, Mongoose." Hannibal is somewhat shocked by his own honesty. He pulls his hand free for the last time. "If you wanted it, I would."

"Almost believe you, Snake."

"More than I could hope for." He eases off the bed, retrieves the tray, dumps the lot of it into his desk drawer on the way to the en suite, out of sight. A large roll of Ace bandage from the cabinet; a box of sterile gauze pads; a can of antiseptic spray. "Do you think you can stand long enough for me to bandage your back and ribs?"

"Then clothes, right?" Will's voice is beginning to tremble again, to rise in pitch, alprazolam or not. "There's—we left them downstairs, but you—"

"I have more," Hannibal assures him. He should have known better than to leave Will alone with no warning. "We'll wrap your ribs, and then pajamas." Hannibal dumps his armful of supplies on the end of the bed, then squats to look at Will eye to eye. Will gasps at the first touch of Hannibal's fingers to his face, but relaxes into it just as fast. "Only another step to go, and then you can rest."

Will's eyes flutter open. "Think I want that pain medicine."

"Of course."

“You sure we can’t do this lyin’ down?” His eyes are wide, bloodshot and tired.

Hannibal moves his hand to Will’s hair, carding through it, hoping to calm him down once more. “We can try.”

And Hannibal does, taking twice as long, not doing nearly as neat a job as he wishes, but perhaps Will might feel like sitting up tomorrow, if not standing. Another pair of his hunting briefs, and the sweatpants no one has ever seen him in, and the largest, softest white shirt that he owns. Hannibal’s grateful for his choice to wear his least-favorite, most disposable underthings and suits on hunts now.

Will’s practically carved of wood as Hannibal pulls up the underwear and the pants. His eyes are clamped shut, and Will is unresponsive when Hannibal washes his face, and again when he says he’s going downstairs for the pain medicine.

When he comes back, Will has flipped onto his side, facing the center of the bed. His eyes track Hannibal as he moves around, putting on pajamas of his own, tidying up after himself, at last. He stands there after his speed clean, Will staring, Hannibal staring back.

“Come to bed,” says Will after what seems like hours.

“I need to mix the medicine,” Hannibal suddenly remembers.

“Okay. Do that, and then come to bed. Please,” Will adds, eyes flicking to the other pillow.

Another ceramic cup from the bathroom filled with liquid relief; another bemused look from Will over the nature of the cup, but he drinks it, downs it in one go like a terrible whiskey.

“Something else learned from Mardi Gras?”

Will’s shoulders shake, and his smile is easier as he takes the sidecar of aspirin. “Mardi Gras. C’mere, Snake.”

It's impossible not to, though Hannibal climbs in slowly and carefully. “I didn't want to presume,” he says, putting the cup on the headboard, having just cleared it of detritus. Hannibal stays propped on his elbow, but Will intercepts his other hand before he can go back to playing with Will’s hair. “Too much?”

“Wanted to ask you to put me to sleep again. It was…” Will squeezes Hannibal’s hand before letting it go. “It made me feel close to you. Like before.”

“You realize the oxycodone will likely make you sleep first?”

“That what you gave me?” Will shakes his head, stubble grazing against the pillow, audible in the stillness. “Dunno whether it’s more that I’m worn out or that I still trust you for some goddamn reason.”

Hannibal suspects it to be the former, but says nothing. “The effects of sedation should hit first.”

“Already came through the door,” says Will. “Were those two safe together? The benzo and oxy, not the aspirin.”

“I’ll be monitoring you.”

“Oh.” Will shrugs. “I suppose you’ve given me worse.”

“I have.”

“Could you do more of the supposedly bullshit massage therapy stuff now?” Will’s eyes are glassy from the drugs. He reminds Hannibal so much of Abigail in this moment, as though she truly were his child.

Hannibal pushes the thought away to consider while Will sleeps. “I’m going to touch a point behind your ear that is called an mian. Is it alright if I come closer?”

“‘Kay.” His smile is sleepy and shy, an expression Hannibal’s never seen before, so different from the horror of the vast majority of the night. Hannibal wants to see this kind of peace on Will again, without the aid of pharmaceuticals. For now, however, Hannibal focuses again on the task given to him, to scooting over toward Will until their breath mingles.

“You’re aware of the part of the skull known as the mastoid process, of course,” Hannibal begins. “It’s never at exactly the same point—at least, the location of an mian is not, but the depression which leads to it is dependent upon the placement of the mastoid process.”

“Squares ‘n’ rectangles,” says Will, yawning as Hannibal’s fingers search for the correct spot on his skull. “Did you—that feels opposite of good.”

“It may ache slightly, but the feeling will soon pass.” He rubs at the pressure point just as with the others, slow circles, even pressure, gratified when Will’s eyes slip closed and he relaxes even further. “Better?”

Will just hums and moves his head closer until his and Hannibal’s foreheads touch, noses nestled side by side, Hannibal’s fitting perfectly into the notch where Will’s was broken at some point in his life. He keeps circling the spot, enrapt, long after Will has fallen asleep.

Chapter 4

Will sleeps peacefully well into the morning, only fidgeting once, when Hannibal puts him on his stomach to ease the pressure on his ribs. As for Hannibal, he doesn't sleep, at all. He sits up in bed, checking Will's vitals once in awhile, attempting to read, and then attempting to sketch, and then attempting not to think about how many pieces he'll be tearing Mason into.

Ten o'clock rolls around, and Hannibal leaves a note on his pillow that he's downstairs making breakfast and will return presently. It feels unnervingly domestic, considering what brought them to this point. By the time he's made coffee, the warmth in his stomach has turned to ice as he tries to figure out what on earth to cook for someone in a traumatic recovery. What he's come to call Abigail's Breakfast seems a bit heavy for Will's stomach. Perhaps simply toast.

Hannibal doesn't recall the last time he prepared nothing beyond toast, but for Will, he'll try.

He hears footsteps as he's plating breakfast. "I intended to bring it up," Hannibal calls out.

"Well I decided to bring me down, instead." Will slowly rounds the corner into the kitchen, eye still swollen, bruising gone black. "Hope that doesn't cramp your style too much."

"It occurred to me that you might have an upset stomach," begins Hannibal, "so I kept the meal light. A few slices of brioche toast and very strong coffee."

"So I managed to cramp your style before I even limped down the staircase." His smile is hesitant and fleeting, but it existed, if only for a moment, and it gives Hannibal more hope than he'd expected.

"It was a challenge," Hannibal replies, "but hardly an unwelcome one." He leaves the breakfast tray, coming to stop Will from leaning so heavily against the counter before he hurts himself further. "You'll find I'm just as sturdy," he says, offering his arm.

Will looks at him, the sullen somber state that Hannibal is accustomed to, but shifts his weight to lean lightly against Hannibal. "At least you aren't trying to carry me over the threshold."

"That would be a terrible idea, given the state of your back."

"Otherwise, you'd do it, wouldn't you?" His laugh is brief, but genuine. "Stubborn bastard."

Hannibal steers them toward the living room. "I've been told it is one of my more admirable qualities."

"Then you commune with liars," says Will. "Though I suppose you don't go hungry that way."

"There is a never-ending supply of free range rude."

Will doesn't reply until Hannibal helps him sit in one of the green armchairs, wincing internally as Will hisses and stiffens. "Is it people toast?" he asks.

"Would that bother you?"

“I’m honestly not sure anymore.” Will looks down at his hands in his lap. “I enjoyed bringing Randall to you.” He meets Hannibal’s eyes again. “Preparing him with you, both his body and...well. The consumables.”

Hannibal has no prepared response. Even Abigail was upset to discover that Hannibal visited the same butcher shop as her father. “I had assumed it was part of your deception.”

“It was,” says Will, “until it wasn’t.” He licks his lips. “Can we have the coffee now?”

Still a little dumbfounded, Hannibal nods, and goes back to the kitchen. Will holds the breakfast tray in his lap while Hannibal rearranges the furniture, dragging the side tables in front of their chairs. He can’t remember when or if he’s moved the furniture around.

Will takes his coffee properly black, and typically sips at it the way Hannibal does. Today, however, Will gulps it as though he’s drinking gas station fare. Hannibal shoves the disdain away, and takes one of the bread plates, instead. The brioche is excellent, as expected, but it reminds him too much of Abigail this morning, and the time Alana took Will’s place at the table, and how disappointed he was by her presence.

“The toast smells delicious,” Will says. “I’m not sure I can keep it down right now, though.”

Hannibal wants to convince him to take a bite, to settle his stomach if nothing else. He suspects that his paternal feelings are bleeding through. “Excuse me,” he says, putting down his breakfast and standing up. “I have something that may help with your appetite.” Will tilts his head as he nods.

His cell phone isn’t far away, having left it in the guest bathroom on accident, and he dials it on his way back to Will.

“Good afternoon, lovely girl. Are you busy?”

“Not really. Still trying to learn French. Emphasis on trying.”

Hannibal smiles. “That’s very good. I have someone you should talk to. I’ll put you on speaker.” He does, and then puts the phone beside Will’s coffee. “Go on,” he prompts. “Say hello.”

Will’s eyebrows can’t seem to decide where to go. “...Hello?”

“Hey.”

Will blinks, like he’s trying to place the voice. It doesn’t take him long. “Abigail?”

He forgets breakfast, forgets Hannibal is even in the room, so Hannibal goes ahead and steps out. More coffee and fresh toast will be needed, after all.

“You could’ve told me.”

Hannibal stills, fresh breakfast tray in his hands—he hasn’t looked at Will yet, no more than necessary. All he knows is that the phone call seems to have ended, and that Will has moved to the

sofa, stretched out, the back of his head facing the doorway. That, and he sounds like he's been crying, though in a different manner from the previous night, thankfully.

"I would've done it, you know," Will tells him, sniffling. Hannibal tries to ignore how he wipes his nose with his fingers, then his hand off on his pants. Instead, he focuses on the bandages over the back, and plans the best possible means of changing them for optimum comfort. "If you'd told me it would protect Abigail, I would have agreed to whatever you wanted to do."

"It seemed more prudent to do it my way." Hannibal does the unthinkable and sets the tray on the floor beside the couch. "If I may?" he asks, gesturing to the small empty spot beside Will's feet. When Will doesn't respond, Hannibal crouches down, seeking his eyes. He opens his mouth, hesitates. "'Prudent' is a poor choice of word by itself. The solution to the problem came to me suddenly, and there was little time to implement. I'm unused to concerning myself with a teammate, let alone two."

"So *epiphanal* prudence, then."

"Something like that." Will still hasn't looked at him, but he does extend his hand, which Hannibal takes in both of his gratefully. He's seized with the urge to lay his lips to all the cuts and bruises. It takes far too much strength not to do so. "I planned to reintroduce you when we arrived in Provence."

"You were so sure I would go with you."

Hannibal traces a finger over one of the ligature marks on Will's wrist. "I hoped."

"I need you to promise me that you'll never leave me out of a decision like that again," says Will. "If you mean for us to be a family, then you have to treat me as a partner and not a pawn."

"I know." Hannibal can scarcely hear himself, feeling like he's suddenly been turned inside-out. "I know that now."

Will tugs on his hand. "Get up here," he tells Hannibal. "Let me move my feet." When he does, though, Will grunts, screwing his face up; his eyes are inaccessible to Hannibal now because they're closed. Hannibal takes his offer, but gently pulls Will's feet and ankles back into his own lap.

"I assumed yours would have gone cold during your conversation."

"It did," confirms Will. "You didn't have to make fresh...everything. Wouldn't be the first time I've let my coffee go cold."

Hannibal reaches down to the tray, trying to disturb Will's legs as little as possible. "There's nothing wrong with a bit of self-indulgence," he says, wrapping Will's hands around a cup of coffee. He puts the plate of toasted brioche in Will's lap for lack of anywhere else to put it.

"And whose self is being indulged here?"

"Both of ours, I should say." His eyes meet Will's for the first time since Hannibal returned from the kitchen. The irises seem steelier today, framed by wet lashes. "How is Abigail?"

Will licks his lips. “She seems happy.” He brings the cup up past his lips, inhaling deeply. “We didn’t have much to talk about.”

“Oh?”

“The only French I know is Louisiana Creole,” says Will. “We don’t read any of the same books. She asked how I was, and I didn’t know what to say, and that put a damper on things.” He takes a sip of his coffee, too much, too fast; Hannibal wonders if the burn is appreciated, needed. “She eventually wheedled it out of me, though. Said the only person who should keep secrets from her is you,” and he chuckles.

Hannibal isn’t sure what to do with his hands, now that they’re unladen. He knows what he wants to do, but there hasn’t been a proper moment to ask yet. “What, exactly, did you tell her?”

“That I was attacked. Held hostage. Injured.” Will stares into his coffee like a diviner. “She got upset.”

“Did she mention that she will be here soon?”

Will barely nods his head. “And wants to help with the reckoning.”

“Deadly girl,” says Hannibal, smile creeping across his face. “How do you feel about it?”

“Quit with the psychiatry crap,” Will replies, eyes flickering up from his cup, gaze commanding. “But I’m good with it, I guess, as much as I can be. She was born into it, made like us. Might as well respect her embracing and reconciling with her nature.”

“I agree entirely.” Hannibal is gratified to see Will finally poke at his toast—he’s at least touching it, if nothing else. “How is the pain this morning?”

“I feel like one giant bruise,” says Will. “Trying to ignore it mostly, with mixed results. Think I could sleep for another year.”

“If you would care for more pain medication, I must insist that you eat first.”

Will pinches off a piece of the brioche, tearing it haphazardly while holding the coffee in the other hand. “Maybe later,” he says. “I’d like to keep the day as normal as possible.” Frowning, he adds, “I’ve usually walked the dogs by now. I don’t think I’ve even asked who’s looking after them.”

“Your trauma incorporates your pack,” Hannibal explains, though the pained look on Will’s face makes him want to offer reassurances and nothing more. “It may be some time before you feel entirely comfortable around them again.”

“That’s not fair to them.”

It’s so very Will, to put the needs of his dogs first. The idea of Will’s pack becoming a trigger is intensely painful. Perhaps one or two dogs could prove therapeutic, what with not sounding like a horde.

“I’m sure Bedelia is taking very good care of your dogs.”

“Oh my god,” says Will, sputtering with laughter. “How on *earth* did you manage that?”

Hannibal rests his hands over top of Will's ankles; it's much less awkward than sitting with his arms crossed, and Will doesn't seem to mind, nor does he startle. "I promised I wouldn't kill her."

Will narrows his eyes. "Coming from you," he says, "that's highly specific phrasing."

"So it is."

"How many limbs and organs can she expect to keep?"

Hannibal considers this before replying, "Most of them."

"Christ," though Will hardly sounds horrified. His tone is close to resignation, Hannibal thinks, but not quite there.

Will pops the bit of toast he's been worrying between his fingers into his mouth. Hannibal can't tear his eyes away from Will's face, though he knows he's being unspeakably rude. Even so, the intensity of his gaze is mesmerizing, his jaw moving slowly as he chews. It reminds him so much of the meals they've shared since Will's release, and of Will's thorough and absolute seduction of him, and—

"What are you thinking about?"

Hannibal inhales deeply. "Things I probably shouldn't," he says.

"It's strange—not the toast; the toast is very good." Hannibal nods deferentially. "It's strange that you are as afraid of our growing...peculiar intimacy as I should be. I dislike the thought of being an unconsulted apprentice to your sorrow."

Will picks off another piece, pecking as a scavenger does, looking for the best and easiest part to steal away. "What was it you said to me last night? That you needed me to trust you implicitly, that you were you and wouldn't hurt me? I need you to have that same faith," Will says. "You need to trust that I won't *let* you hurt me."

Another deep breath. "I was wondering how much of yourself I have truly seen since you returned to me, and how much was Jack's suggestion. Watching you eat, seeing the way you watch back, unafraid, I'm reminded of the depth of my…" It's impossible to look at Will, knowing what he is to divulge. "Should you have carried through with your deception, your betrayal of me...I fear how I would have punished you for it. How I would have reacted; if I would have made a rash decision." Hannibal swallows and says, "I was afraid when you called, and I haven't been afraid in a very long time."

He doesn't respond; Hannibal can hear the faint pop of Will's jaw as he chews. Was he punched too hard? Should Hannibal have checked his teeth?

"I don't know whether you bring out the best or the worst in me," adds Hannibal, and he isn't used to this, either, to being incapable of disguising his words.

"I like seeing you afraid." Hannibal's eyes fly open, and Will's seem damp, or perhaps it's Hannibal looking through a film over his own. Maybe both. "You thought you would lose me, exactly as thought I would lose you." Will smiles, a bare twitch of an emotion; Hannibal feels like he's looking into a mirror. "We aren't so different after all, are we?"

“I suppose not.”

“You have a death grip on my feet,” says Will, a non sequitur for which Hannibal is grateful. “Any reason why?”

“My pain is heartfelt,” Hannibal replies, “and yours is physical.”

“No. Mine is both.” Will’s eyelids slide to half-mast—not seductive, but contemplative. “I’d appreciate any sort of diversion, within reason.”

Hannibal relaxes his hands and opens his eyes, noticing the scratches on Will’s feet for the first time. He frowns, wondering how he could have been so derelict in his duties last night. “There are pressure points on the feet that help to alleviate pain. Considering how well you have responded to acupressure, I thought it might help.”

“You are *more* than welcome to try,” says Will, shoulders shaking as he laughs. “No one’s ever rubbed my feet before.”

“Then we’ll amend that. If you would flex your left foot, toes pointing up.” He takes the plate of toast Will hands him, sets it back on the tray, and then picks Will’s foot back up. “The kidney meridian,” begins Hannibal, “is useful with treating various types of pain. It runs nearly the entire length of the body, from the sole of the foot to the clavicle. I’ll start here at KD 1, called yong quan.”

Will only nods, shifting, wincing.

“Yong quan is located here,” says Hannibal, pressing his thumb into a depression on his foot, deciding not to be excessively clinical now while Will is still calm. “I’m simply going to press firmly for a few minutes.”

“Alright.”

“If you could try to relax for me.”

“I’m not sure I can,” Will admits. “Anxiety’s starting to randomly flare up again.” He softly adds, “Moving might have been a bad idea.”

“It reminded you of your ordeal?” Hannibal asks. He moves his thumb in small, tight circles, though it isn’t strictly necessary.

“Yeah.” A pause, and then, “I don’t *really* want Abigail to help, to kill.”

“As you said, however, she is her own person.” Hannibal takes up his other foot, seeking the same spot. Still, Will does begin to relax, contrary to his belief that he can’t. “I have made a few subconscious suggestions, of course, but her actions are her own, as were yours.” He looks at his thumbs. “As were mine, long ago.”

“Not ready to talk about yours either?”

“I was not hurt as you were.”

“But you *were* hurt,” Will states.

“Yes.” He says no more of it. “How are you feeling now?”

Will tilts his head, laying it on the top of the back cushion. “Kind of...I’m not sure. Don’t know if it’s the point or just talking, but I’m tired again.”

“Would you rather have another dose of the oxycodone?”

“Trying to keep me goofy and pliable?” he asks with a half-smile.

“Only comfortable.” Hannibal watches Will sink further into the cushion. “There are other pain points on the meridian, under the knees and up the thigh, should you prefer to lie against me.”

Will hums sleepily. “That sounds nice, actually.” He starts to move, then hisses, face twisting in pain.

“I’ll come to you.”

“Maybe—” Will yawns, and it’s more adorable than it has any right to be. Regardless, it soothes the ache in Hannibal’s gut, the part of him that is still wrestling and coming to terms with all that has changed within eight hours. “Maybe we could go upstairs where it’s softer?”

“Of course,” so they do, Hannibal leaving the dishes behind, never having done so in all of his years. Will leans on him heavily, and Hannibal is glad for it, that he trusts him enough to be vulnerable on purpose, not stubbornly pushing himself.

Once upstairs and in the bedroom, they arrange themselves against the headboard, Will lying sideways between Hannibal’s legs, knees drawn up, the side of his face against Hannibal’s shoulder. He takes the medicine again because Hannibal insists, opens his mouth for him without protest, laughs at Hannibal’s moist eyes and wipes beneath them.

“You’re such a sap,” Will says. “I never knew.”

“I’ve never felt like I could allow myself to be. That what you needed was my strength.”

“I think I prefer you human.”

Hannibal kisses his forehead. “As do I. Now,” he says, moving on to the second pressure point, “this is ran gu.” He frees his arm from around Will’s shoulders, twisting slightly, careful to give Will time to move his head. “It requires a gentle touch; I’ve chosen to use both thumbs because—”

“Because it feels really good?” Will sighs; his breath is warm against Hannibal’s neck.

The corners of Hannibal’s mouth turn up. “I did promise you a proper massage.”

“Yeah, I guess you did.” But Will falls back to sleep before Hannibal can move any further. He moves Will’s legs, and puts his arms around Will’s back. His own eyes are heavy, but Hannibal remains sitting up, arms around Will, until his exhaustion forces him to lie them both down so he can join Will in blessed unconsciousness.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

> Art included in this chapter is also posted in (what should be) a mobile-friendly size in the end notes!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next few weeks are productive, but largely uneventful, though there are three moments that stand out indelibly. First was when Will called Jack on the second day of his convalescence. He put it on speaker at Hannibal's behest—"For moral support," Hannibal said, though they both knew it was mostly because he wanted to be aware of all aspects of Will's life.

"Will," Jack said, and Hannibal rubbed between Will's shoulder blades at his full-body wince upon hearing his name, "we're too close to catching Hannibal for you to be able to do that."

"I have to take a break, Jack; I'm breaking, myself."

"And why would that be?"

Will's voice began to shake, and Hannibal wasn't sure if it was for dramatic effect or perfectly real. "The lines are beginning to blur because of my empathy disorder. I don't know what's the truth anymore."

"The truth is that you're snaring the Chesapeake Ripper," said Jack angrily. "You're working for the FBI to capture the man who *murdered Beverly."*

"Don't you think I know that?" and Hannibal knew that Will was near sobbing now. Hannibal's heart leapt to his throat.

"Then you should understand that—"

"I'm not going back to an institution!" Will snapped, though his tears were still obvious. "I would rather die, Jack, because I can't. Not again, not *ever.* You're lucky that I'm even doing this for you, after the way you all betrayed me. After what you put me through."

Jack is quiet for so long that Hannibal wonders if he's hung up. "Hannibal is to blame for that," he finally said.

"He facilitated it. *You're* the one who had me arrested rather than listening to me when I'd been spot on at every juncture, when I trusted you." Hannibal kissed the crown of Will's head, incapable of trying to comfort him, even though Will's words were a balm for his own regret. "I can't let you and the vendetta I gave you commit me to Hell again."

A second long pause before Jack told him, "Take the time you need. You're partially right, and we need you fully on board."

“Thank you. Please don’t come looking for me.”

“Of course. And Will?”

He grit his teeth. “Yes?”

“If Hannibal strikes again?”

“He won’t,” Will replied. He reached up for Hannibal, and he gave Will his hand to grip. “If he does, however, it’ll be me, and then you’ll know.” A few perfunctory goodbyes; a mashing of the end call button; an overly forceful throw at the end of the sofa. “Snake?”

He treasured Will’s nickname for him, loved how Will accepted Hannibal’s in return.

Will turned his head, face tear-streaked. Hannibal couldn’t decide whether Will was more beautiful in sorrow or joy; there was merit to both. “Please,” said Will, tugging on Hannibal’s hand. “Please kiss me. I need to—need to know—”

“I cherish you,” Hannibal reassured him. He sat down on the sofa, pulling Will into his lap; it’s become their favorite mutual, physical comfort. “Sweet boy. I adore you, my Mongoose, my tricky hunter beneath the porch.”

Their lips met, and they’ve done this so often in so few hours, Will clinging to Hannibal as if he’d disappear, Hannibal holding him likewise. They whispered against each other’s mouths—

“I had to,” said Hannibal. “I had to get you out; we couldn’t risk her exposure of me.”

“It’s my fault, *mine,* I sent her to you—”

“The fault is ours. You don’t bear it alone.”

Most often over those weeks at his Baltimore home, as Will’s body healed and Hannibal tried his best to repair the damage to his soul, the words they exchanged were a foundation, the cement for the changing dynamic of their relationship.

“I like it when you take care of me,” Will would say, almost timid. “Your hands, they’re so different from theirs,” and Hannibal would shush him as Will spiraled back into his head.

He’d learned more about Will’s torture when they took the tunnels to Hannibal’s house on the Chesapeake. The trip took hours longer than it should have, Will continually breaking down with new horrors, Hannibal holding him and speaking nonsensical words of comfort, barely holding himself together.

For the first few days at the Chesapeake house, Will sat on the bluff, looking across the water. He was quiet to the point of concern; some days, Hannibal wondered if he would come out to call Will to lunch or dinner and find him gone, tumbled off into the bay, lost to the sea.

The second marker of their shared recovery, thus, was unexpected.

“I need you to make love to me,” Will said to him, waking Hannibal in the middle of the night.

Hannibal blinked awake quickly. He had yearned for this, but it hardly seemed like the right time. “Are you certain?” he asked, propping himself up on his elbow. “You are welcome to take me, instead, if you feel that the moment is—”

“I want them to go away. Why do you think I’ve been thinking so much?” Will stroked down the side of Hannibal’s neck. “I know what you’re about to say: that I’m still healing. But there has to be something…” His hand moves, grips the side of Hannibal’s face. “I’m tired of feeling dirty, Snake. Make me feel clean.”

“You have to understand that this could be nothing more than a reaction from—”

“Hannibal, I swear to God, if you don’t do this, I’m going to shoot you.”

It was impossible not to smile. “Are you manipulating me?”

“Like you aren’t proud.”

“You’re right,” said Hannibal, pulling Will over top of him. “You have triumphed over all obstacles set before you.” He ran his hands through Will’s hair. “How could I not be?”

They kissed, Will licking into Hannibal’s mouth for the first time, growing hard against Hannibal of his own volition. Hannibal let Will keep leading the kiss, but it was his hands that pulled their hips together, his cock that ground against Will’s own through the layers of their bedclothes.

“Say my name,” Will gasped into the join of Hannibal’s neck. “Please, Hannibal, say it, say it, say —”

“Will. Will, my darling boy. Will, the man I love.”

He came repeating Hannibal’s name like a prayer, and Will’s name never left Hannibal’s lips, either.

Hannibal expected Will to become withdrawn again after their consummation, but if anything, Will seemed to be more comfortable with himself, more in control. He still cried several times a day over the most mundane activities, yet Will recovered more quickly from such episodes and sought Hannibal out for physical, sexual comfort.

Hannibal wondered if that was a new result of Will’s trauma, this sexual fervor. Only time would tell.

As they lay in bed together in a hazy happiness following one such episode—for that was how Hannibal thought of it now, though he certainly enjoyed their coupling, rubbing against each other, spilling into their ever-present pajamas—Will told him, “I want to go home and see my dogs.”

“They are likely watching my house.”

“We can be careful.” Will nuzzled closer. “Like you are with me.”

“What a cunning boy you are, using your most polite wiles against me,” and Will smiled against Hannibal’s skin.

And careful they were during this third momentous occasion, though Will had lain frozen in the backseat until Hannibal had driven safely out of Baltimore and lost their tail. It took a toll on Hannibal, too, having to coax Will from the car, holding him tight before helping a weak-kneed Will into the front passenger seat. He babbled and muttered all the way to Wolf Trap, head against the cool window, wringing his hands in his lap.

Hannibal was glad that it was Buster who met them at the car, that it was one of the two dogs Will said he hadn’t heard barking. Will’s face lit up, and Hannibal ignored the dirt Buster tracked into his car as best he could.

Bedelia stood on the porch—Hannibal had never seen her anything less than perfectly coiffed, but there she was, hair pulled back, pants sensible, but not her nicest by far.

“You seem to be enjoying yourself,” said Hannibal, and he was pleased when she glared at him.

“I’m not entirely sure this was a worthwhile bargain.”

He walked up to the steps, though he avoided going up them. Will would escort him, he figured, if and when he decided to go inside. “You regret your choice, Faust?”

“Considering you are the devil,” Bedelia said, “very much so.”

“Not much longer. I think we’ll be departing soon.”

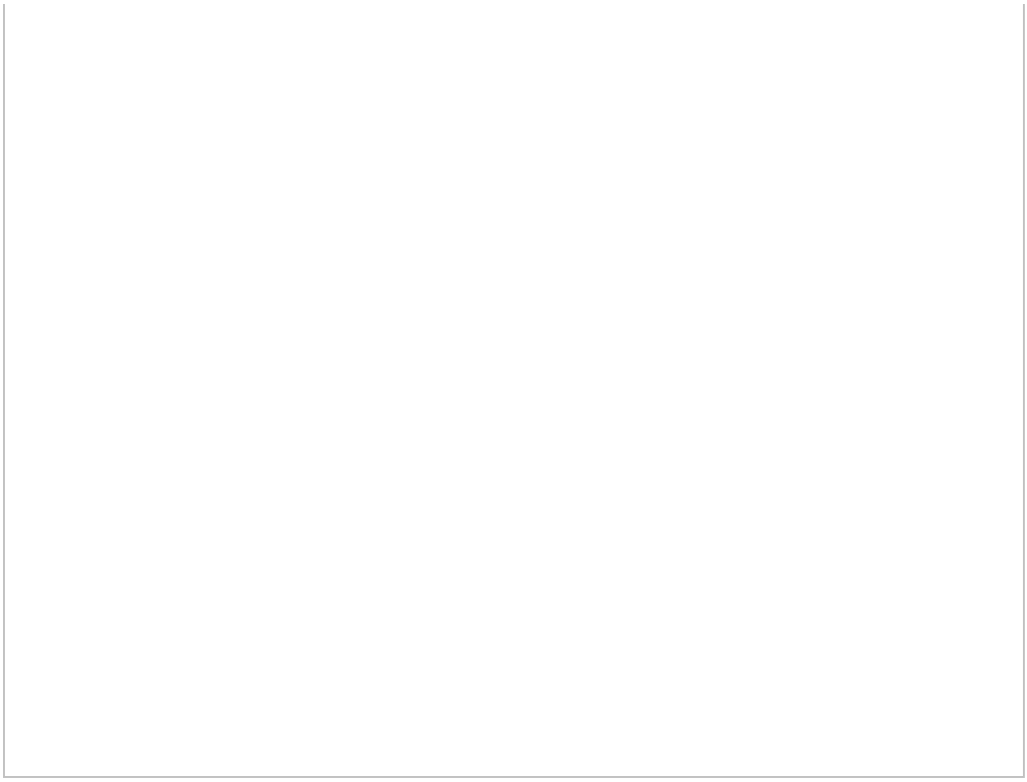
“Where would you take your favorite pet?”

Hannibal masked his annoyance at her tiresome disdain. “Wouldn’t you love to know?”

In the end, Will chose not to leave the safety of Hannibal’s car, and Hannibal couldn’t blame him. Hannibal found Winston, and the two dogs rode in the back. Will grinned wider than Hannibal had ever seen; he found himself almost jealous. Almost.

The dogs loved the tunnels, insisting on exploring every nook and cranny. Will indulged them, of course, so Hannibal had to take him on an impromptu tour, showing him where each path led. He hadn’t predicted that Will’s favorite spot would be Hannibal’s catacomb, but Will stood for nearly an hour, looking at the neat labels on each skull.

embulalia



“Where are the rest of the bones?” he asked.

“I found them unnecessary.” Hannibal gestured to the walls and added, “This was something of an artistic whim. And they aren’t all my kills.”

“The unlabeled ones?”

Hannibal smiled, running his finger over the bullet hole in the temple of one of the unknown. “Yes. I found them here, stacked haphazardly. It is folly to keep such a room but, should I ever be captured, I would find infinite pleasure in knowing this remained secreted away, perhaps for a fellow artist to find and appreciate in the future.”

“A shrine,” Will said. “Your own immortal carriage—an inheritance.” He ran his fingers across the fillings in the teeth of a separated jaw. “These could not stop for Death.”

“Is that how you see me?”

Will traced an eye socket of another skull. “It seems apt. You stop many things.”

Hannibal tilted Will’s face up to his own, away from the wall of the dead. “If I am the pale horse’s rider, then who are you?”

He wound his arms around Hannibal’s neck and replied, “War.”

Pestilence and Famine arrive on an evening flight, touching down at Baltimore-Washington International with their fellow passengers unaware of the whirlwind in their midst.

Abigail is unrecognizable to the untrained eye. She's shaved half of her head, leaving her beautiful hair to grow on one side only, down to her chin, cut to follow the angle of her jaw. Her clothes haven't changed from her old wardrobe, plain-but-pretty shirts and scarves and jeans, which doesn't surprise Hannibal, either. A tangle of tattooed black lilies covers the neat suture where her ear once was, however, and that is nearly unfathomable.

Will is drawn to it immediately, his hand running down the prickle of hair, fingers moving on to trace the flowers, the garden that once sprouted his doom. Hannibal can't see his face, but he can imagine Will's reaction; Will has turned that look of awed disbelief toward him too many times now.

"I missed you, too," says Abigail, and she pulls Will into a hug, dropping the lone bag swung over her shoulder, both seemingly oblivious to the rest of the crowd.

"Careful with him, please," Hannibal warns her. "His ribs are still healing."

Chiyoh practically rolls her eyes.

"You are unexpected," Hannibal says, offering to take her own carry-on. "I wasn't aware you and Abigail were even acquainted."

She removes it, only to situate it on her other shoulder. "You've left too many women alone in Europe."

"Only the two of you."

"As I said."

Hannibal tilts his head—it's as much of a shrug as he'll afford her, though he considers her just as much family as Abigail. "You retired from your post, then, I suppose."

"I gave him the same choice you gave me." Chiyoh allows Will to take her bag—rather, she holds it out to him expectantly. "Escape, whether through life or through death."

"And you have escaped?"

But Chiyoh doesn't answer. "I see your newest thrall has chosen a life sentence, as well," she says in lieu of plain speech.

"He's hardly enthralled," insists Hannibal, "but perhaps we might leave this place before further discussion?" He gives Chiyoh his arm, a mirror of Will and Abigail who walk in front of them. Much to Hannibal's delight, she does take *this* offer.

Their late dinner is a familiar affair, one that makes Abigail smile. "Breakfast always makes me think of our family," she says.

"Because he has conditioned you to associate the two." Chiyoh looks severe, even as she cuts into her brioche. Taking a quick glance at Will, sat at his right hand, Hannibal can tell that Chiyoh does not impress him. In fact, Will's scowl is the same grumpy frown that Hannibal fell in love with in the first place.

He silently vows to keep Chiyoh around.

Will is also mostly silent through their breakfast dinner—“Brinner,” Abigail declares, laughing, and Will beams at her as a proud father would. It stirs an unfamiliar resentment in Hannibal, that Abigail could steal Will's attention so easily, that their daughter could monopolize time belonging to Hannibal.

As a psychiatrist, Hannibal realizes such is a common reaction in new fathers, to have contempt for their children and feel replaced. But now, *he* is learning to be human, and Hannibal finds himself far more territorial than usual.

Perhaps Abigail picks up on his darkened mood, because she kisses Hannibal's cheek first when they all excuse themselves from the table. She does the same for Will, and Hannibal feels somewhat ashamed for wanting to deny Will this simple happiness.

Chiyoh side-eyes Hannibal as she stands, announcing, “We’ll be taking the labyrinth to the main house. I assume that my charge knows the way?”

Abigail scoffs. “I'm hardly your charge if I'm the one leading you. Or do you share my father’s terrible pride?”

Hannibal frowns; Will laughs; Chiyoh glares.

It feels like a horribly normal family gathering.

“I want you to touch my body.”

Will stands in the door to the en suite, towel slung low on his hips. The deep bruising has mostly faded away, and the cuts have healed. It’s Will’s ribs and back that are still worse for wear, the former because there isn’t much to be done beyond wrapping them, and the latter because Will wears at least one layer at all times, irritating the scabbing burns.

That’s what Hannibal is prepared for now: rebandaging Will’s torso. He’s laid out all of the necessary supplies on a clean towel on their bed, as well as one of the soft baggy t-shirts Will has come to favor. Typically, Will is even wearing his bathrobe when he comes to Hannibal, covered at all times, a naked soul in lieu of a naked body.

Hannibal allows himself a few seconds to drink Will in, bites his tongue to hold back the litany of compliments he wants to bestow, still uncertain what all words Mason and his men might have used. Just because Will has opened up more fully doesn’t mean every detail may have been divulged.

“You mean beyond caring for your injuries?”

Will nods shakily. “It’s time,” he says. “I miss the way your skin felt against mine that first night, when you joined me in the bath.”

“Would you like me to undress further?” asks Hannibal as he clears the bed, his open pajama shirt swishing against the slippery fabric of his pants.

“No. Not yet.” Will swallows, and Hannibal hopes he doesn’t look as hungry as he feels, watching the undulation of Will’s throat. He sits down on the bed where the towel had been, his own still wrapped around him, facing Hannibal. There’s a flush across Will’s collarbones that vees slightly down his chest; Hannibal doesn’t know if it’s from the shower, or if Will is aroused, or if it’s an odd response to fear.

After considering his options, Hannibal says, “Turn around. Lean back against my chest.” Will exhales heavily as he nods again, twisting and scooting himself into place. The towel shifts as he moves, baring the top of Will’s right thigh, but nothing more. “Are you able to lay the side of your face against my shoulder?”

“Unless I shrunk in the shower, not comfortably.”

“Here,” and Hannibal pulls a pillow over to double up behind Will’s lower back. “Try now.”

Will hesitates, but not for long, situating himself as Hannibal asked. When his back hits the pillow, Will winces—“I’m alright,” he tells Hannibal before he can inquire. “I’d rather have your chest hair hitting my shoulders than my back.”

“It bothers you?”

“God, no.” Will sputters a laugh, smiling against Hannibal’s skin, stubble scratching. “No, it’s...very masculine.” Quietly, he adds, “This is going to sound silly, but even seeing that little bit exposed by the top of your pajama shirt is comforting. It makes me feel safe.” He laughs again, more self-deprecating than Hannibal expected. “I sound ridiculous.”

“Hardly ridiculous. Remind me to undo an extra button for you from now on. Now, if it’s alright, I’m going to touch your ear.”

“I hate my ears.”

“And I do not.”

Will sighs; Hannibal can’t decipher the emotion behind it. “Touch my ear, then, if you must. It’s not really what I was expecting, I have to admit.”

“There’s a pressure point here,” begins Hannibal, “on the inside of the antitragus. I’m going to hold it between my thumb and forefinger—”

“You mean you’re going to stick your finger in my ear and pinch me,” Will says dully.

“—and apply mild pressure, you tiresomely rude boy.”

He snickers, but still says, “I’m hardly a boy, Hannibal.”

“There is a not insignificant age gap between us.”

Will stiffens suddenly, enough to be concerning, though not enough for Hannibal to release his antitragus. “You don’t have a...it isn’t a—a *thing,* is it?”

And now Hannibal can't help but smile. "My prior platonic relationship with you was, to my mind, of a non-sexual, paternalistic nature. You are younger than I, both in years and in your awakening. An apprenticeship of sorts." He nuzzles into Will's hair. "I care for you, yet also, separately, desire you."

"You find me desirable?" Will's voice is slow, strained. "When we, for lack of a better word, rut against each other, it isn't only because you're attracted to my brain?"

"Oh, Will." Hannibal lets his voice grow husky, releases the tension he's felt as he tries to hold himself back. "I have been desperately, recklessly attracted to you since first you met my eyes. There is nothing that could happen to you to change that." He begins massaging the point on Will's ear, encouraged by Will's beginning restlessness. "I had assumed it was your ordeal that kept you distant, even when you ground against me, my name a whisper."

He trembles as he inhales. "Mason said you only cared for 'unsullied perfection'. I foolishly believed him."

"You weren't foolish," says Hannibal. "You were under duress."

"I don't want to regret this in the morning."

"We can stop, if you wish."

Will relaxes back, reclines further. "You never told me what this one did," he says, pointing to his ear. "It feels warm. Kind of tingly."

"Massaging this spot excites the cerebral cortex," explains Hannibal, dropping his voice even lower. "It enhances sensory perception, primarily touch and hearing, which means that when I speak to you as I am now, your body becomes more receptive."

"My ear has a dirty talk button?"

"Would you like to find out?"

He nods frantically; Hannibal is stunned by his sudden fervor. "Anything they didn't do. Anything sensual. Even if I don't need it tomorrow, I need it now."

That's more than enough explicit consent for Hannibal. "I need this now, as well, to be able to move my hands over your skin. My teeth and tongue. Someday, when you are ready, I'll lay you out and explore every inch of your body with my fingers and mouth, remap you, reorient you."

"Repair me?"

"No, my love." Hannibal records Will's hitched breath to play again later. "You are not a broken man." The angle is awkward, but Hannibal manages to card through Will's shower-damp hair with his free hand. "Tell me where to touch you."

Will doesn't say, simply grabs Hannibal's hand from his hair and pulls it down to trace over his collarbones. He adjusts the angle and the pressure until he's satisfied, the tone arm to Hannibal's cartridge. When Will releases Hannibal's hand, his own hovers there over it, following the set motion, whether as a shadow or a mirror, Hannibal cannot say.

“Do you remember when you handed me the knife?” Will asks, fingers trailing down Hannibal’s arm from knuckles to elbow. “In the kitchen, when I brought the meat to prepare.”

“Of course.”

“You kept your hand on the blade, once I was holding the handle—really holding it, gripped and balanced.” Will sighs a little; Hannibal can smell the beginnings of his arousal. “I thought you knew then, about Freddie.”

Hannibal drops his fingers from Will’s ear, choosing to knead his knuckles into the side of Will’s neck, instead. “I did.”

“But it wasn’t why you held on,” says Will, pushing his neck into Hannibal’s touch. “You knew I was meant to betray you, but you were still unsure of my trustworthiness. It hardly makes sense, that you could still trust me, knowing what you knew, yet I know it’s the truth. So it wasn’t that you were hesitant to leave yourself defenseless.”

“Why do you think I did?”

“Because you didn’t know how else to tell me.” Will is lying on Hannibal so heavily that he wonders if they could simply meld together, take refuge in the same body, incapable of separation.

“That I trusted you?”

“That you *longed* for me, had longed for me so strongly that it *ached.”* His nonchalance isn’t insulting; it’s that simple for Will, now that he sees it, another design he’s puzzled apart. “That it didn’t matter if I turned the blade against you, because your feelings wouldn’t change. Most importantly, that you hoped I wouldn’t.”

Hannibal swallows. Being peeled back layer by layer is discomfiting, whether he appreciates being seen or not. “The hope was the most important to you?”

“Yes.” Will takes Hannibal’s hand again, guides it down his sternum, back up, back along his collarbones, a gentle, simple circuit. With his other hand, Will touches his hip bones, becoming reacquainted with himself.

“Why?”

“Because it meant I hoped, too.”

It’s impossible not to turn Will’s face to his, to claim his lips, perhaps more forcefully than he should. Will kisses back with as much enthusiasm, though, both of them lost in each other.

They go no further that night. There is no need.

Chapter End Notes

Reblog the art on tumblr!

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

> This chapter gets pretty intense. Will walks Hannibal through his rape as part of his therapy. I legit set this fic down for a year after writing this chapter. As difficult as it was to write, I'm extremely proud of the way it turned out.
>
> Anyway. Just wanted to give warning above and beyond the rape/non-con tag.

Will is physically distant come the next day, as they both had expected him to be, but he remains emotionally receptive. His smiles are genuine around Abigail, who has truly come into her own during her independence abroad. Hannibal suspects her behavior is closer to a normal teenager's, though perhaps deadlier than most.

The remainder of the week is much the same: Will, keeping a two-foot radius between himself and everyone else; Abigail, beaming, radiant; Chiyoh, a spectre in constant flux. Hannibal cooks constantly, as if he's anxious or nervous. He's not used to either of those emotions.

Abigail and Will are appreciative of the steady stream of snacks, though. They sit at the table, planning and plotting, working in every piece of information Chiyoh brings to them after scouting around Muskrat Farm. Sometimes, Will excuses himself to sit with his dogs on the floor, leaving Abigail to sketch on her own.

She frequently asks Hannibal what happened to Will, precisely, but it isn't Hannibal's place to say. Her eyes narrow each time, like the day she told him to be the man on the phone. He suspects she knew then what he was but, like Will, hadn't wanted it to be true. Whether she did or not, it hardly matters now. They have a family to protect, and Abigail is devoted to the task.

Will thinks of a few items he needs from the house in Wolf Trap; he has a panic attack when he considers going himself, so Chiyoh resigns herself to going, instead.

"I'll come with you," Abigail says, leaning into Chiyoh's side when she wraps her arm around Abigail's waist. Abigail gives Hannibal a pointed look over her shoulder —*go take care of him,* it says, *whether he wants care or not.*

But Will comes looking for Hannibal before he can go looking for him. Hannibal holds out his hand, prepared for Will's hesitation to take it, but Will practically falls into his arms there beside the counter. He holds Will, trying not to cling. After days of no touch, it's incredibly difficult.

"I'm so tired of this," Will mumbles. "How am I supposed to kill them if I can't even leave the house?"

Hannibal smiles into his hair. "We could bring them to you."

"As enticing an idea as that is, I'd rather wreak havoc in their own sanctuary."

“Does it matter, since they all are doomed to die?”

“Not all of them,” says Will. “Mason deserves more.”

Hannibal feels his heart race, wonders if Will can hear it beating as loudly as Hannibal can. The scent of Will’s anger infuses his despair, heady and rich. “What do you have in mind?”

“Later,” Will says, shaking his head. Hannibal furrows his brow, considering the likelihood that Abigail knows something he does not. “I just want to not think about it for a little while,” he adds, peering through Hannibal’s skull without sight. His lips brush against Hannibal’s neck when he says, “I miss you. I miss your touch.”

“All you need do is ask.”

“I know, but it’s so difficult, to look at you and want you so much, only to have the bottom of my stomach knot itself up and acid burn my throat. I feel dirty for not wanting to *be* dirty. God, I can’t fucking explain it.”

Hannibal shushes him, petting down his back. “You’re doing very well right now.” He stops on the downstroke, dipping his fingers just beneath the hem of Will’s shirt, fingertips resting on his skin, barely there. “We could start somewhere simple. Familiar. Sensual, as you put it.”

“Can we stay in here?”

“If you like.”

Will sighs, tension already beginning to ebb. “Well. Go on, then.”

Hannibal rests his cheek against Will’s head; it’s quickly become his favorite way to hold him, and how wonderful it is that he should have so many embraces to choose from, to catalogue. “It will be easier to rub your back if you remove your shirt.”

He expects Will to withdraw into himself again, but is grateful when Will’s muscles and breath remain unchanged. Will squeezes Hannibal more tightly, constricts him like he’d consume his comfort if given the chance.

“Will?” he asks, prompting a break in the silence.

“Can I take yours off first?”

“Please.” Hannibal doesn’t recognize his own voice; it certainly isn’t strong or composed, a fragile and weak exhalation in a room with nothing else to breathe in. Will pulls back as soon as he’s granted permission, fingers deft on the buttons of Hannibal’s shirt. His eyes watch his hands, and Hannibal watches Will’s eyes, hoping for a glimpse that doesn’t come. Hannibal only lets go of Will long enough for him to push his shirt off of his shoulders and down his arms, letting it fall behind Hannibal’s feet on the floor. His undershirt comes off just as quickly, pulled up and over his head, dropped carelessly to the side.

Hannibal watches Will close his eyes, still not looking up, and then he gingerly takes off his own tee. Will’s hands wind up clasped in front of his chest, fingers wringing, white-knuckled. Eventually, Hannibal’s patience pays off, and Will glances up at him through his eyelashes.

“Hi.”

“Hello,” Hannibal replies, and the corners of his mouth feel as soft as his voice.

Will’s palms follow the contours of Hannibal’s torso—up his sides, across his chest, over his shoulders and around to the back of his neck. It’s a toss-up as to which of them is shaking more. “You feel good,” Will finally says. “You’re so warm. I never thought you’d be this warm.” His arms cross, hands dangling between Hannibal’s shoulder blades. “I want to curl up with you in our bed, skin to skin, want to memorize you the way I know you’ve memorized me.”

Hannibal presses his fingertips into Will’s back, and Will puts more of his weight on Hannibal. “You’ll like the name of this one,” he says, gradually increasing the pressure until Will hisses. “This is zhi shi, otherwise known as will’s chamber.”

“Wonderful. Even your massage techniques have puns.”

There’s a lump in Hannibal’s throat that feels suspiciously like mirth. “It’s located along the bladder meridian, and is said to aid in the flow of energy throughout the body.”

“I don’t really care what it does,” Will admits.

Hannibal isn’t sure how long they stand here, letting Will melt against his body, painting Hannibal’s skin with soft sighs. “This is all I want for you,” he finally tells him, fingers wandering along Will’s back, almost too overcome to paint the moment in his mind. “Only pleasure, lovely boy, in everything you do, in everything we do together. I want to see you covered in sweat as you move above me, victorious.”

Will groans and rubs his face further into Hannibal’s shoulder.

“I long to see you covered in blood, dripping with the life of our hunt, wild in your freedom. Beautiful in your cruelty and wrath, a lion made of a lamb.”

“So do I,” says Will, voice harsh and broken. “Fuck, I want that, too. All of it.” He pulls away from Hannibal, hands clutching his upper arms, nails digging into Hannibal’s muscles. “Show me. Show me, Hannibal.”

"No,” Hannibal replies. “Show *me.* Share your hate so I may fully appreciate the glory of your revenge.”

Will clenches his eyes shut. “You don’t know what you’re asking of me.”

“I ask for your design,” and Will’s eyes flutter open. Hannibal feels his hardness against him. “You revel in death, lovely boy. Give me this gift, and I will give you everything.”

“What more is there to tell you, Hannibal?”

“If I am to show you the difference in such acts, then I shall need you to walk me through them one at a time. The technique is called therapeutic confrontation; I’ve used it with other patients with satisfactory results. A reprogramming, if you will.”

He swallows with difficulty. “Here,” Will says. “This is your domain—do it here. I wanted our bed, but if you must make me repeat myself, I refuse to taint our sanctuary.”

Hannibal nods. “A fair request. Shall we begin?” Will jerks his head, obviously and understandably terrified. “Come lean against the counter.”

Will is shaking, but he complies. Hannibal leaves him there, lets Will ready himself, arms crossed across his torso, elbows gripped. He's surprised when Will takes a deep breath and crosses his wrists behind his back.

"Okay," he says, eyes mesmerizing in their defiance. "Give me your worst."

"That's not the point of this exercise," Hannibal reminds him gently. He stands in front of Will, raises his hand to drag his fingers down his face, trying to help him relax, as futile an effort as he imagines it to be. "Guide me, Will."

He licks his lips, but they're still dry. "He's sneering when I open my eyes," begins Will. "I've never seen anyone so disgusted before, even though the world is still fuzzy from the drugs. He can tell, and slaps my face repeatedly—I wonder if he realizes that it won't work, just as I wonder who he is."

Hannibal caresses Will's cheeks, one after the other, over and over. "How does this feel?" he asks.

"It's...it's good."

"Go on."

"A voice filters in from far away—he keeps talking about how goddamn innocent I look, helpless like this. " Will squeezes his eyes shut again, though he hasn't spared a single glance at Hannibal yet. "He says he doesn't want to wait; he wants me just like this. Someone calls him Mr. Verger, and that's when I realize what's going to happen."

Hannibal asks, "Where did Mason touch you then?"

"It wasn't him slapping me," explains Will. "He was bald. Wore white. I'd never heard his voice before, but he was just as sadistic as his boss. Maybe more so." Will's breathing picks up. "He was always the one that beat me, in between rounds. Not Mason, not the lackeys. Only him."

"But surely Mason touched you."

Will glares at him. "You know he did. I told you."

"Yes," Hannibal says. "This is part of your therapy." Will rolls his eyes; Hannibal feels his mouth turn up at the corners. "There's the sass. You're stronger than you think."

"I don't *feel* strong," but Will's voice doesn't tremble.

"Keep going."

"Isn't there a doll I can just point to parts on? Crayons and paper to scribble stick figures of my assault?" Hannibal levels his gaze, so Will continues talking through it, voice resigned. "He *did* touch me. Grabbed my neck like he intended to choke me to death, and I already wanted him to. God, Hannibal, I was terrified."

Hannibal trails his hand down, not quite applying pressure to the front of Will's neck, only stroking it, smoothing the skin with palm and fingers. Will's breath begins to calm again. "Tell me what you're thinking about right now. Remember that I am your comforter and not your tormentor in this."

“Your hands,” says Will, and it reminds Hannibal of *Will’s* hands and his fantasy of Hannibal’s death. “They aren’t smooth like his. He didn’t pet me liked he loved me, like I was a favorite.”

“Good.”

Will doesn’t need prompting to go on. “Mason yelled at—his name was Cordell, I hadn’t remembered until now. But he told Cordell to leave my face alone and concentrate on my…” He stops, and Hannibal begins to use both hands now, running them from behind Will’s ears and down his neck to his shoulders. “He cut off my clothes. My vision still hadn’t fully returned. I blinked over and over, trying to make my eyes work, even though I knew it wouldn’t help.”

Hannibal moves his hands, fingers bent like he’s taking off Will’s shirt again, runs his finger tips down his arms like he’s doing the same with his sleeves. When he reaches Will’s crossed wrists, Hannibal changes his tactics. “I have always loved your hands,” he tells him, murmuring in Will’s ear. “I imagined them often, thought of them tearing into our prey, how my art would be meaningless compared to your feral fight. It would be you who inspired me, I hoped. Your honoring of Randall was magnificent.”

“The way you cleaned and bandaged my hands,” Will says, just as quietly, letting his fingers tangle with Hannibal’s behind his back. “It was the most intimate experience of my entire life.” He leans forward enough to lay his head on Hannibal’s shoulder. “And now you have cared for my entire body, and I find I have nothing else to give you in return but the same.”

“You owe me nothing.”

“I owe you awe.” Will’s tears are hot against Hannibal’s skin—the feeling is exquisite. “A monster who learned to love, and all for me.”

Hannibal squeezes Will’s hands a final time before removing them. “He took your pants next.”

Will stands back up, straight and steady; Hannibal has never been prouder. “Yes. Sliced through them like butter, if you’ll forgive the common turn of phrase.”

The sweatpants are easy to untie. Instead of pushing them down to pool around Will’s ankles, Hannibal pulls them down slowly, going to one knee, lifting Will’s feet one at a time to slide them off. On a whim, he kisses his way back up, alternating between his legs. Will moans, a little thing, but gratifying. Hannibal will make these memories easier; he will make Will see how much he must depend on Hannibal to protect and soothe him.

“What then?” Hannibal asks, making his way slowly up Will’s torso. Goosebumps begin to prickle the skin, and his stomach moves with the expansion of his diaphragm, breathing deeply now as he relaxes again, Hannibal teaching him that only his touch will comfort; attend; arouse.

“Mason told Cordell to…” Will sighs, but the very slight outline of his cock in his underwear remains. “He told him to ‘treat himself’, and he sneered again—his teeth, Hannibal, I’ve never hated anyone’s teeth so much. All sharp, but not like yours, not a predator of the same caliber, an entirely different sort of sadist.”

Hannibal tilts his head. “I’m a hunter,” he says. “Why do you label me sadistic?”

“I could give any number of examples, but I’ll go with the pleasure you’re gaining from this.”

“Does it bother you?”

“Not even close to as much as it should.”

Hannibal feels strangely chastised. He doesn’t like it. “I assure you that this is merely a side effect. It was not expected. Watching you slay your demons is intoxicating.”

“Mason—” Will shakes his head. “He laughed and started pawing at me through my boxers. The zip ties around my ankles, Cordell had cut my pants around them, so they still remained. I saw an opportunity, and brought my knees up hard under his chin. But Cordell gnawed and sucked harder on my neck and I thought I could feel myself begin to bleed. Mason ripped off my underwear—the seams ripped so loudly. Someone put an arm around the backs of my thighs, and my shoes were still on, my *shoes,* and Cordell pushed his way inside me, and he reached between my bound legs to jerk me off, oh *God,* Hannibal.”

“We can stop.”

“I need you to touch me,” says Will, gasping. “Redesign me like you want to. Please.”

And Hannibal can’t refuse his mongoose. His mouth finds Will’s neck, and Hannibal thumbs his nipples more gently than he thought himself capable of. Will lets his head fall back to give Hannibal room to work; the idea comes to him to bruise Will in the same patterns as his attackers, using his mouth to suck deep, livid marks along his collar bones and up and down Will's neck.

It’s apparently the right approach; Will bucks his hips against Hannibal, both of them hard.

“I must be sick,” Will says, but he groans again, anyway, louder still when Hannibal sneaks a hand behind him and grabs Will’s wrists firmly. “I shouldn’t be getting off on this.”

“There is a darkness in you,” says Hannibal as he pushes Will back, his spine an elegant arch over the counter. “All we are doing is opening the door.” He bites along Will’s jaw hard enough to draw blood, relishes his curses and heavy sighs. “This is the pool from which you will draw your fury. We each have a fear inside our soul that powers us; it propels us. This is the pit of hell from which you shall spring and rise.”

Will squirms against him, rubbing their cocks against each other. “I swear I can smell my blood through my skin,” he says. “It’s headier than in the van.”

“Tell me about your back, about the burns from the carpet.”

“Every time Cordell fucked me,” says Will, teeth clenched, muscles tense. “He’d hold me down as hard as he could— *fuck,* Hannibal, *yes.”*

“You like the attention to your Adam’s apple?” Hannibal licks his way over it, satisfied with his bruisework, and Will’s moan is practically strangled.

“Now, yes. Not when someone’s trying to collapse my windpipe.”

“Of course not.”

“But I fought him, fought the other two, too, and they were rough about it,” Will continues. “I think one of them was the man who kicked me, trying to keep me still while his brother worked me over. So I guess it wasn’t all Cordell like I'd thought.”

“Who punched you, brave boy?” asks Hannibal. He’s kissing his way along the places on Will’s face that were bruised by a fist.

“That *was* Cordell. Fucking, *oh,* fucking crooked-pricked son of a bitch.” His noises are always divine, but never so unguarded as they are now. Will's anger is thick in the air, a euphoric suffocation. But there's an underlying glee, a sweet scent of heat, stronger and stronger as they move more erratically together.

“Why would he hit such a pretty face, little mongoose?”

“I bit a chunk out of his cheek.”

It's impossible not to picture Will, grinning maniacally, viscera in his teeth and dripping down his chin. “How did it taste?”

“I can't recall.” They're panting together, lips against parted lips. “I'll have to take another bite.”

“And what of our Mason?”

Will scoffs, or maybe Hannibal mirrors him, both a single soul. “All he did in between turns was run his mouth.”

Hannibal moves to suck the lobe of Will’s ear, nibbling at it, laving it with his tongue. “I imagine he’ll be just as verbose as you torture him.” He presses his hand between them, moving it over Will’s cock, snarling and, at the last moment, squeezing harder than he should.

Will shakes and whines as he comes, and Hannibal takes the opportunity to rut against the back of his own hand, animalistic. He needs to know that Hannibal is wild, too, that he’s not alone, that he’ll never *be* alone. Hannibal rubs himself to completion, releasing Will’s hand to run his fingers through Will’s hair, kissing and biting his lips more roughly than he’s ever dared.

“I love you,” Will says into his mouth. “Every part of you, Hannibal. Your hate and disdain and your manipulative mind, and the way you bring out the worst in me. All of it. I love you.”

“You nourish me,” and he hopes Will understands. From the way he insistently, silently begs for his continued touch, his skin starved for killing kindness just as Hannibal’s is, he thinks Will does.

Hannibal holds him in his tight embrace, come cooling against their skin beneath their clothes, neither of them caring about the mess. There will be plenty of fluids coating them soon enough, caked in the hair on Hannibal’s chest that Will’s fingers are sunk in, soaked over every inch of his beloved mongoose’s naked body, because Will is ready.

The beast has awoken.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will urged Hannibal to return to his work—more coaxed, Hannibal supposes, since Will has largely become the narrator of both of their lives. As to whether Will is reliable or not, Hannibal hasn't decided. He likes to think Will is his man, not still Jack's, but Will's persistent reluctance to divulge his design makes Hannibal curious as to his true intentions. Surely Hannibal's care has been enough to sway him entirely.

Then again, Will seems incapable of predictability.

Chiyoh and Abigail have been little help, the former still stoic and reproachful, the latter dedicated to Will. Hannibal thinks they've found much to share through their original misinterpretations of his guidance, a father-daughter hobby of sorts. There's also Chiyoh's influence to be considered where Abigail is concerned; Hannibal caught them hand-in-hand in the kitchen when he came down to make breakfast.

"You're up uncharacteristically early," he'd said to Abigail.

"Haven't been to bed yet," she'd replied with a cheeky smile. A ghost of a grin had crossed Chiyoh's face, and Hannibal decided to forego his morning espresso. The coffee maker in his office waiting room would simply have to suffice.

It doesn't.

Excellent coffee wouldn't distract him from the secrets Will keeps. It makes Hannibal uneasy, nags at his sense of self-preservation. Maybe Will had kept a staged phone call to Jack as a hidden card. Hadn't Will suggested telling Jack he needed a break? The circumstances for using that card were, of course, unexpected; nevertheless, the chance remains. Will could betray him yet.

Hannibal waits for his eight o'clock appointment, but the patient never shows. He paces in front of his tall windows for ten minutes, pausing on occasion to stare blankly out at a dreary winter day, the snow collected on the sidewalks already beginning to gray from Baltimore's morning traffic.

Behind him, Will haunts the ladder in his light blue thermal and ungodly vest. Hannibal has never been so out of control of his memory palace—of his entire life.

"You know how it feels now."

The ladder creaks beneath Will's weight. Hannibal doesn't look. He doesn't need to.

Will laughs, a cross between self-deprecation and legitimate amusement. "Except that you like it. Having no idea what happens next, what happens to you. Being the one wound up and played for once."

It's physically painful to admit, "Yes."

"And this invasion of your mind?"

“I find it...discomfiting.” A snowflake strays from its trajectory, landing on the glass. “You shouldn’t be here, not as you are.”

Will comes into focus behind him, one perfect blue iris disrupted by a crystal of snow. Hannibal can almost feel the ghostly hand squeezing his shoulder. “How am I usually?”

“Quiet.”

“Figures.”

“I do prefer this, however.”

Will grins like a wolf. “I’ve seen you in my memory, too, you know. That is, in the memories I’ve created for myself. In dreamscapes called forth from desire.”

The snowflake melts down Will’s reflection. “A palace of your own. I suppose I should thank you for the invitation.”

“You told me you loved me,” says Will, soft as an icicle. “You called me ‘beloved’.”

“And then?”

“I killed you, of course.”

Hannibal steps closer to the glass, unsettled when Will stands still, his arm stretching out to stay clamped to Hannibal’s shoulder. “May I ask how?” Hannibal asks. His breath on the window obscures Will’s face.

“You may.” Will tilts his head, assessing Hannibal. “Doesn’t mean I’ll answer.”

“Saving it for a special occasion?”

“Depends on how irritating you are.”

Hannibal wants to ask him if he’s real, if he’s here, if the two of them have truly merged so greatly. He needs to know how deeply the renovation will wound Hannibal should Will prove to be Jack’s man, and not Hannibal’s. How Will could leave Hannibal at this juncture, after Hannibal’s care and love and nurturing—

He refuses to cry in front of himself.

“Do you doubt me so much?” Hannibal can scarcely hear Will’s voice. “Or is it actually your own intentions you distrust? What you’re capable of, no matter how great your adoration, should your worst fears be realized.”

“I don’t know.” Hannibal turns, walks through the Cappella Palatina until he doesn’t, until his office desk is his father’s, instead, edges all glazed with patina and surface warped by rain.

“I think you do.”

“Why are we here?” The ladder groans beneath phantom weight. “Why are *you* here?”

Will chuckles, but it doesn’t warm Hannibal. “Why not, and...well. Why not?”

Hannibal taps at the desk—his own again, and his office again, and a turmoil of his own making. Humanity is the worst outfit, of all, and he's already tired of wearing it out in the world. With Will, where it's safe, he does his best not to mind shedding his person suit when necessary. Here, however, in his secondary sanctuary, Hannibal's fear makes him grind his teeth, grate them against the inside of his cheek until it bleeds and he can focus on the iron in his mouth instead of the lead in his stomach.

Jack barging into his office an hour later is, quite frankly, the least of Hannibal's problems. It's an almost welcome distraction from Will, who Hannibal can only assume is still staring at him from the ladder.

"Where's Will Graham?"

Being impertinent beside the books, Hannibal wants to tell him. "Good morning, Jack." He glances at the smeared print-out that's been unceremoniously thrown down on his desk.

"Yes, good morning, Dr. Lecter—where's Will?" Jack's eyes have the strained appearance of the overworked and underslept, though it's difficult to tell from the shade cast by the brim of his hat. The shoulders of his long overcoat are dusted with snow; Hannibal hopes he wiped his shoes on the way in.

"Why would you ask me?"

Jack huffs. "Well for starters, you're his psychiatrist."

"Unofficially," Hannibal reminds him.

"And two," continues Jack, gesturing at the paper, "everyone else is asking, too."

Hannibal glances down at his desk. "'Where'd Will Go?'" The corner of his mouth twitches downward. "This is a very poorly tinted photograph. I've never seen Will in such a hat."

"The usual Freddie Lounds pun-and-spun."

"And here I thought Miss Lounds deceased."

Jack waves Hannibal off as though her life or death were inconsequential. "I made—the FBI made a deal with her so we could catch the Chesapeake Ripper."

And it nearly worked. "I see. And are you any closer to doing so?"

"No, but that isn't why I'm here." Jack crosses his arms, an intimidation tactic that worked on Will once upon a time, but never will on Hannibal. "You need to tell me where to find Will Graham."

Hannibal leans back in his chair, legs crossed at the knee, fingers interlaced on his lap. "Why do you suppose I know?"

"Hannibal, I don't have time for prevarication!" The paper flutters from the force of Jack's fist on the desktop. "I have a maniac out there bashing heads in with a shovel. People are dying, maybe as we speak."

"There's no need for hyperbole, and even if—"

“It may not be hyperbole!”

“—I *did* know, it would be under strict doctor-patient confidentiality.”

Jack glares; up close, his stubble looks grayer than Hannibal thought. “What happened to being ‘unofficial’?”

Hannibal tries not to feel too smug when he says, “Officiality exists in even the most casual of circumstances. For instance, our own talks after dinner could be said to be official business due to the nature and origin of our friendship. I, of course, keep such things in strict confidence.”

“This is ridiculous.”

“Life often is.”

Quietly, almost cautiously, Jack asks, “What have you done with him?”

Hannibal slips off his guard. “Why should I have done anything to him?”

“With him.” Jack pushes back up to standing, shaking a finger at Hannibal with his other hand. “Not to him. I said *with* him, which begs to question, what have you done *to* him?”

“Nothing.” Hannibal chokes on his own lie. He decides immediately he dislikes telling them.

“Then where have you been?”

“Is this an interrogation?”

Jack narrows his eyes. “Hannibal—”

“Shall I keep this on or off the record?”

“Dr. Lecter—”

“Or is this an interrogation?” Hannibal hasn’t let his physical mask drop, still has his voice schooled in nonchalance and dripping with self-assuredness. “Do I need to contact my lawyer?”

Jack deflates; his brow screams disappointment. “I don’t know. Do you?”

Hannibal stands up, buttoning his jacket and smoothing it down. He straightens a stack of books on his desk. His hands have never been restless like this before. In fostering Will’s codependence, has he changed some vital element of himself?

“Are you feeling alright?”

“Strange you should ask,” and oh, it is very unlike Hannibal to sass. Is Will in the room or inside him? The cover of *A Metaphysics of Psychopathology* holds no answers. “Forgive me,” Hannibal says. “Between your line of questioning and a recent falling out with Dr. Bloom, I’m not precisely myself.”

Jack sighs; Hannibal smells the stinging brine of Bella’s cancer when Jack adjusts his hat. “She said you’d disappeared like Will. Not answering your phone. Not at home.”

“I suppose you thought to connect the dots.”

“There are things I don’t need Will’s help to see.” Hannibal hears the voice of his friend, not an antagonist. Jack truly doesn’t want to be here, asking these questions, sweating Hannibal more than he’s sweating beneath his wool coat. “For all your protestation, I know you know where Will is, and I’m certain you’ve seen him since he went rogue.”

Hannibal weighs his words. “I was contacted by him, yes. He asked for my assistance regarding his emotional state, and so I went. But you must understand that I cannot divulge his location. I attended him as a physician, in my role as a psychiatrist. In this, I take my patient privilege seriously.”

Will chuckles, and it echoes down the hallways of the Lecter estate. “You’re good at honest bullshitting. You don’t ever lie, do you? Not really.”

“I can get a subpoena,” says Jack, “if I have to. If you make me.”

“He’s the one lying,” and Will is so close, either behind Hannibal or inside his head. “Trust me.”

Hannibal does, in this. “Then I suppose you will need to file for one.”

Jack leaves without saying goodbye, and Hannibal is grateful for it.

When Will shows up again after his one o’clock, Hannibal assumes his palace is continuing to play tricks on him. He ignores Will in favor of continuing to sketch one of his first kills, an inelegant affair, but the first kill he shared with another. The only kill, he supposes, discounting poor Randall, but Hannibal hadn’t done more than set the murder into motion. Never would he have sent such an animal to Lady Murasaki’s door, no matter what she might carve in its face.

“Never thought I’d have to ask for your attention, especially when I’ve spent so long avoiding it.”

“Forgive my reticence,” Hannibal says, “but you’ve been plaguing me all morning.”

Movement on the mezzanine—it sounds more solid than before. “I don’t think you’ve ever complained about my presence before, either. “Not even when I’ve pointed a gun at you.”

Hannibal smiles, a wisp of a movement. He continues to sketch, moving on from the crudely wrought swastika on the dead man’s forehead to add definition to his sunken eyes. Out of fondness for his aunt, Hannibal accentuates the realization before the moment of death, etching a horror in the irises.

“Who was this?” Will’s sudden presence hardly shocks Hannibal. His grip on Hannibal’s shoulder has no spectral quality, however, and that *does* surprise him.

“A relic of Vichy France I knew in my youth. He shouted crude insults at the wrong woman.”

“How chivalrous of you, to avenge her honor.”

“There was no honor lost.” Hannibal looks up when Will’s very real hand settles on the blotter. “How did you get here?”

“Through the door.” He chuckles ruefully and adds, “Just as before, though I think I’m better dressed this time around.”

“I rather like you in orange but—”

“Of course you’d say that.”

“—this outfit is more flattering than a jumpsuit.” And it is, the salmon-colored button-up Hannibal likes so much, a welcome change from Will’s lounge wear he’s favored during his convalescence. The shirt puts Will’s lovely throat on display, a canvas of skin, painted red, framed by the black of his coat. There’s no snow in his curls, trimmed and styled in such a way as to hid the still-growing hair torn out by Mason and his men. “You’ve been here a while.”

“Long enough.”

Perhaps Will wasn’t a figment, after all. “Did you overhear my conversation with Jack?”

Will removes his hand from the desk and sits down in its wake. “Should I have?”

“You’ve done an excellent job placing suspicion upon me.” Hannibal tries not to reach up to trace along the line of Will’s jaw. He fails. “I fear I’ve not done much to allay his concerns. He insisted I divulge your location and is convinced I’ve harmed you in some way.”

“Well.” Will smiles crookedly. “He’s not wrong.”

“Have you come out of hiding to read me a list of my sins?”

“I don’t know that I should bother. You don’t seem interested in penance.”

Hannibal says, “How very wrong you are, cruel boy,” before he can think better of it. But Will’s smile grows wider. Deadlier, even.

“Crueler than you know.”

“I find that difficult to believe.”

Will covers Hannibal’s hand with his own, moves it up to hold his cheek. “You believe in God,” says Will. “It can’t be that much of a stretch.”

Hannibal curls his little finger around the ramus of Will’s jaw, his fingernail resting on the soft spot above his temporomandibular joint. It would be so simple to apply pressure. Will would be disabled quickly, would jerk in pain and sudden dizziness. One quick knuckle to the temple might even kill him.

Would; would; would; might. When did carefully considered curiosity become spontaneous pondering?

“What are you thinking about?”

Hannibal doesn’t know if he’s supposed to answer, but he does. “Killing you.”

Will narrows his eyes, licks his lips. “Would you do it?”

“I don’t think I could bear it,” Hannibal admits. “Your absence would be profound, more than it was before.”

“When I was locked up?”

“Yes.”

“What are you reading?” he asks, as though they hadn’t been speaking of his death. Will runs his finger along the spine’s edge of the book. *“ A Metaphysics of Psychopathology.* T hat sounds exactly like your brand of bullshit.”

“It’s a challenge of the reality of psychiatric diagnoses.” Hannibal watches Will’s hands and thinks of how beautiful the knuckles were bathed in blood. The edge of Will’s sleeve shifts up, displaying the ligature scars on his wrists. “The author considers what is true with regards to classification and what is a mere product of the patient’s imagination.”

“As I said, exactly your brand.” He’s up, hands in his pockets, striding slowly toward the other side of the room. “You still haven’t asked me.”

“If you would still kill me?” Hannibal finds himself helpless and follows Will to the chairs. The familiarity of their places here settles over him like a mantle; when they sit across from each other, it feels like they never left.

Will settles back with a hum. “Yes. It would hurt like pulling out my own teeth, but I could do it.”

Hannibal couldn’t be prouder of his lover, his protege. “And how would you do it?”

“With my hands.” Will gives him a sly look before closing his eyes and leaning his head back. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“I’d hardly complain,” and Will laughs along with Hannibal’s quiet mirth. He looks powerful like this: leaning back in his seat; arms lined up with those of the chair, hands gripping the ends; legs spread wide, inviting. “What lies behind your eyelids?”

“A false memory.” He doesn’t elaborate, just settles in further, the tension visibly draining from his body. Will is resplendent on his throne, head thrown back carelessly. His gaze returns to Hannibal slowly, gives him the rare gift of the maelstrom of his eyes and deadly smile.

Hannibal doesn’t realize he’s crossed to Will until he’s there, knelt in worship, his hands over Will’s. He can smell Will’s arousal, stronger than the sickness that clung to Jack. “What did you see?”

“Same as before: your death.”

“Was it a righteous kill?”

Will’s fingers trail up the side of Hannibal’s face to comb through his hair, making it as disheveled as Hannibal feels. “It was a benediction.”

“So you forgive as God forgives.” *As you are a god yourself.*

“Would you give me your mouth?”

Hannibal sits back on his heels, back bowed as he rests his head in Will’s lap. “I would give you anything, Mongoose,” he says, still caught off-guard by the abrupt question and his own incomprehensible turmoil.

“Your freedom, then?” Will continues petting his hair. “Would you give that? Or is it a step too far, such a leap of death beyond dying?”

Dread lances through Hannibal’s stomach; cotton blankets his ears. “I would prefer to keep ownership of myself.”

“Wouldn’t anyone?”

And Hannibal realizes, “You ask for my surrender.”

Will doesn’t answer.

“To you, or to Jack?”

Nothing.

“This is to be goodbye, I take it?” Despair pricks behind Hannibal’s eyes. “Everything I have given you, and you bring me the Last Judgment alone?”

“Your mouth,” and what is Hannibal to do but give that to him, too?

Will’s cockhead sits heavy on Hannibal’s tongue as he pushes between his lips. Hannibal, overcome with greed and the need to savor the moment for the first and final time, attempts to slide his mouth down Will’s shaft, only for Will to knit his fingers in Hannibal’s hair and pull. He thrusts shallowly—there’s a strange disinterest, as though the act is but a means to an end. It’s understandable, given the flaccid state of Will’s cock.

Hannibal feels his knees falling asleep, but he pays it no mind, because Will is bitter on his tongue and warm against the roof of his mouth. His thighs tingle and his arms grow numb. He’s powerless to stop Will’s cock from slipping slowly to rest inside his cheek, and Hannibal realizes now that it wasn’t arousal he smelt on Will.

“I know how rude it is to snoop in other people’s cabinets,” Will says, gently pulling himself free from Hannibal’s mouth, “but don’t hold it against Abigail.”

“Her idea?” His voice slurs, drooping along with the rest of his body.

“Chiyoh’s. She wanted us to kill you.” Will eases Hannibal down to the carpet, helping him lie on his side—in case he should vomit, Hannibal thinks. He knows the potential side-effects of the paralysis agent. “I thought of a better use.”

Hannibal attempts to speak only to discover the powder works faster than expected. His mouth and tongue won’t work, all his words reduced to gargling, pushing spit out to drip on the floor. The zipper of Will’s fly echoes in the room’s sudden silence.

“I’m a good fisherman,” Will whispers. He stands, stepping over Hannibal’s prone body. Movement on the mezzanine, and then Hannibal is alone.

But not for long.

Chapter End Notes

Hannibal's first elevated kill really was a Nazi, and Lady Murasaki really did carve a swastika into the dead man's forehead. Thomas Harris out here delivering some hashtag relatable content.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

> Mason has no manners whatsoever and is extremely crude and a little graphic regarding all the trauma he put Will through, so be aware of that going in.

They took Hannibal out the back, one arm over each of the men's shoulders, like the drunk students he'd seen carried into dorms during his college years, upright enough to be passably sober. Hannibal recognized the regional dialect of Italian they spoke; even without their conversation about their employer, he would have known they were pig men. As to why Will would give him up to the same lot who brutalized him, Hannibal had no idea, but it does pique his curiosity. Perhaps Will planned for that, as well.

Regardless of the reason, the Sardinians laid him out in the back of a windowless van. Thankfully, they did not join him there.

Hannibal could do nothing but stare at the roof, flat on his back, and he thought of Will again, in this same place, restrained. His Mongoose, cuffed and chained in a police van. His savage boy, straight-jacketed for transport—he wished he could have seen him like that, and wondered if Will might allow Hannibal the view someday, should there be a day for them after this.

Closing his eyes, Hannibal tried to picture the scene. He knew the scent of Will in the moment of distress, a light decomposition akin to that of Helicodiceros muscivorus. There was a certain poetry to it, to dead horses and anal cavities and all the horror a metal box could contain.

"What is it about me upset you find so compelling, anyway?" Will knelt down beside Hannibal, head tilted, looking down to consider him. "Who do I remind you of?"

The van filled with snow.

Not here, Hannibal thought. *If you were truly beside me, in the flesh, I might consider the subject, but not when you're naught but a shadow.*

Will sighed, and the fingers caressing Hannibal's face felt unfairly real. "Why is it so impossible to believe I'm here? Are we not conjoined, an intricate weave? You've fostered it; why deny it?"

Where are you?

"I can't say."

Can't, or won't?

Will smiled, perfect and pure. "Don't you trust me?"

I don't know. A tear slipped from the corner of his eye and froze below his temple. *After this afternoon, how could I?*

“Oh, Snake.” Will plucked the tear from Hannibal’s face, peeled it from his skin. “Heartbreak doesn’t suit you, at all.”

What have you done to me?

“Physically? As in now?” He scrunched his nose. “I figured you’d know that better than me—it’s your poison.”

Hannibal breathed slowly, trying to compose himself, trying to look through Will’s face to find the roof of the van again. He could hear Will’s cries echoing off the walls, then down the halls of the Lecter estate, and then they weren’t Will’s sobs, at all.

You weren’t invited here.

Will clapped his hands over his ears. “Stop seeking me.”

Mischa shouted, her pleas to stop melding with Will’s, and—

“Dammit, Hannibal, I don’t want to remember—”

Neither do I!

The van lurched, and Will gasped his name, once, then faded away when Hannibal’s head connected with the wall.

Should he survive, Hannibal intends to have an extremely long conversation with his family as to proper poisoning techniques. Will gave him too high a dose, unless Will was aiming to keep Hannibal helpless for whatever interesting tortures Mason could dream up. The Sardinians had taken him to the barn.

“Mr. Verger wants him marked,” said a portly, round-faced man. Hannibal noted a haphazard scar on his cheek, sunken in spite of best efforts made to disguise it, to fix it, but nothing short of cosmetic surgery could hide the distinctive shape of Will’s bite.

Cordell, then. Hannibal wondered how he tasted.

But the Sardinians stripped him, and threw him over a sawhorse, and Hannibal was caught unawares by the searing heat of a branding iron, thrust along his spine, between his shoulder blades. He’d always wondered how it felt to be roasted, though Hannibal was unlikely to fry anything for the foreseeable future, once he found a way out of his situation.

Hanging from a high beam by the back of a straight jacket wasn’t helping.

Seeing Will walk in with Mason helps even less.

“Now can you believe that?” Mason has the most grating voice, an annoyance greater than poor Franklyn, though Mason’s death would be far from a mere convenience. “Your eromenos actually

liked the little ordeal you cooked up for him, but that's okay," and takes Will's hand, presses a gut-churning kiss to his knuckles. "We cooked him up for you, too."

Will stares at Hannibal, unflinching, letting Mason do as he pleases with his hand. "How so?"

"He's just like any one of my other little piggies now."

"...You've branded him?"

Hannibal would recognize Will's righteous fury anywhere. He feels the corner of his mouth quirk in response, the first movement he's been able to make since Will left him in his office. His bare toes still won't flex, and Hannibal still can't shift away from the rough canvas rubbing against the oozing wound on his back, but it's a start.

"Why?"

Mason shrugs. "Why not?"

"It wasn't part of my design," says Will. "I offered myself back to you for a reason: a chance to torture and kill the Chesapeake Ripper."

"And we'll get you right back in that van, darling. Don't worry your pretty little head!"

Mason keeps petting at the back of Will's hand; Hannibal maintains his mask, but marvels at Will's lack of revulsion. Unless, of course, Hannibal has been lured into a manufactured situation, just as he feared. The skin he can feel sloughing off the new brand means little to him in comparison.

"Did you know," continues Mason, "that your rook here called out your name every time he came on my cock?" He tuts; Cordell smirks; the Sardinians look as unaffected as Will. "Every single time. It was almost *unbearable,* Hannibal—not the desperation. He wanted what happened, you know. Practically *begged* for it with those sweet puppy dog eyes of his. Actually, come to think, he *did* beg for it, eventually, and that was the terrible part, his refusing to *fucking shut up."*

Hannibal glances at Will's free hand, tightened into a fist.

"Even the kiddies get quiet after a while, but not your pet sodomite," and Will's eyes clench up to match his left hand's knuckles. "Carlo had *such* a good time jerking him off." Mason and two of the Sardinians laugh before Mason adds, "I think we lost count of the number of times he came—can't believe you kept this slut all to yourself! Such a needy, greedy asshole on our dear Will!"

"Stop," Will says, levelly, quietly. Hannibal's arm jerks in response—he wants to go to him so badly, hold him close for protection and never let him go. Will is his; how dare Mason think he can have what belongs to him.

"Oh hey! He *does* know the word!" Hannibal wants to cut the smile off of Mason's face. "And you," says Mason, pointing at Hannibal, *"do* have emotions! I bet you'd've really liked the way he cried out for you. All part of the game, though, wasn't it?"

"Of course." Will meets Hannibal's eyes again, and the world around them falls away.

Where have you brought me?

Our mandapa. Will grins, and Mason thinks it's for him, still prattling on. *How do you think I got past your palace walls?*

Hannibal feels so fond he could choke. His cocoon sways in the warm breeze, Carlo's hand around his bare ankle an afterthought.

I'm sorry they hurt you. Will has a mask all his own, but his eyes betray him. They weren't supposed to.

Are only you allowed to harm me?

How else does a mongoose hunt?

"Good Christ, are you even listening to yourself, Cordell?"

Carlo gets pushed out of the way, and Cordell maneuvers a scalpel behind Hannibal's testicles. "He ate my cheek, and it's this animal's fault for teaching him!"

Mason rolls his eyes. "I think missing part of your face is a fair price to pay for humping this sweet thing." He slaps Will's ass for emphasis, but Will doesn't budge. "Stop threatening the doctor's balls and go back to the house."

"Mr. Verger—"

Cordell is ignored. "Bring me the knife, Matteo, before this turns into more of a monkey shit-show than it already is."

"Mr. Verger—"

"Oh my g—Tommaso, take the other good doctor up to the house. Go...I don't know, go bother Margot, I'm sure she needs bothering." Mason takes the Harpy knife and slaps it into Will's hand. "Now, the bargain our Graham cracker has made is his body for the chance to get rid of you. Not sure that's a great deal for him, but how on *earth* could I refuse?"

Will takes the knife as it's expected, his face still void of feeling, and it's at Hannibal's throat before he has a chance to breathe.

I dreamed this. Will's lips replace the icy blade as they lie in the tall grass. *I slit your throat and was baptized with your blood.*

Did it satisfy you?

Not as much as this will.

He scratches the back of his neck.

A crossbow bolt slices through the air and buries itself in Matteo's thigh.

Chaos erupts as Tommaso abandons his mission if his footsteps are to be trusted. Hannibal hears a single shot ring out, and then Tommaso gives a garbled shout, and then collapses to the floor of the scaffolding. Another thud, and screaming, and the sounds of boars enjoying themselves.

Matteo pulls the bolt out of his thigh and promptly falls to his knees. Blood pools around him as he reaches out for Carlo.

“Shouldn’t have done that.” Hannibal’s voice plays like static in his own ears.

Another gunshot, and Carlo topples onto Matteo’s dying body. The whistle of another arrow, and the snap of a rope, and Hannibal joins them on the platform. He looks up in time to see Will step behind Mason and reach into his coat, the Harpy long since dropped and forgotten. Will pulls out a bag valve mask, pins Mason’s arms beneath his own, and forces the mask onto Mason’s face.

“Have you ever had a mix of powdered psychedelics?” Will asks him as he squeezes the connecting bag. “Because you’re inhaling them as we speak, and what a strong dose you’re inhaling.”

Mason’s first breath relaxes his body to the point of slumping in Will’s arms. He takes a second, a third, a fourth, soon breathing deeply from the bag seemingly on purpose. When Will releases him, Mason’s giggling.

“Your good doctor prescribe you this before he fucks you? Got any spare prescription pads?”

Will says nothing for a few moments. *How’s your back?* he asks Hannibal.

Irritated by straps and buckles, but nothing I can’t handle.

Good. Will picks the knife back up, testing the weight in his hand, tossing it gently. “Do you remember what you told me that first time I broke free?”

Hannibal frowns. Will hadn’t told him he’d escaped another time. Then again, he’d failed to mention calling out for him, too.

“I said—” Mason keeps snickering. “I said you were an ungrateful gilt.”

“And you’d make me a sow yet.”

“Mhm.”

“Tell Hannibal how you got me back in the van.”

Mason crouches down next to Hannibal, eyes wild. “I told you I’d cut into Hannibal’s face until I found out how deep his cheekbones really went.” Mason traces them; Hannibal hasn’t felt nauseous in decades.

“That’s good,” Will tells him. “That’s very good. Would you like to show us?”

“Want me to carve him up and serve him like Sunday dinner right here? Such a nasty, nasty boy you are.”

“Don’t,” says Hannibal through clenched teeth. If Mason ruins the nickname, Hannibal will bring him back from the death he’s hurtling toward.

“No, Mason.” Will picks up the Harpy and holds it out to him. “Show us on you.”

Mason turns the knife over, rolling it in the palm of his hand. “Oh. Okay.”

The first strip of flesh comes from Mason's cheek, and it lands beside Hannibal's face with a wet *thunk.*

"Hannibal." Will's teeth gleam in the half-light. "Are you hungry?"

Flicking his eyes toward the growing pile of meat in front him, Hannibal says, "Starved."

"Bigger pieces for your guest, Mason." Will reaches out for the blade, prying it out of Mason's bloody hand. He lifts a scrap of hanging fat and muscle from Mason's jaw. "Like this," and he slices it off before dangling it in front of Mason's face. "See?"

"Right, right." Mason smacks his mostly intact lips. "Wouldn't want to be rude, I suppose."

Will eases himself down to sit beside Hannibal, smoothing down the front of the straight jacket. He plucks a piece of Mason's face from the platform floor. "Open up."

Hannibal marvels at how their roles have switched so seamlessly, at how docile he feels in spite of the pain lancing through his back. He chews his morsel of Mason, eyes glued to Will's face, enrapt. Will blocks the lamp overhead, light streaming around his hair, shadows painting his face, lovelier than any Botticelli. For as savage as he looked at Mason, his gaze holds nothing but care for and devotion to Hannibal.

"Good?" A needless question when Hannibal sucks Mason's blood from his fingers. "More?"

"Dine with me."

"Never been one for sashimi. Not unless it's yours."

"' This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me.'"

"Hey!" Mason drops another slice of his face onto the pile. "I know that one. Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ."

Hannibal turns his head to look at him. "Do you partake of communion, Mason?"

"I could eat—ouch, goddammit!"

Will keeps squeezing Mason's fingers. "You shouldn't grab from other people's plates."

"But I'm hungry, too." He draws out the vowels like the petulant child he is.

"So cut off your nose. Spite your face."

Hannibal watches Mason chuckle, making blood and saliva run down what's left of his chin, dripping pink on his coat to mat in the fur trim. "Whatever you say, choir boy." The pass of the blade through cartilage makes a satisfying crunch.

"Dinner and a show," he murmurs, and Hannibal obediently opens his mouth for another piece of face. Savors; swallows. "A true embarrassment of riches for a captive audience."

"Couldn't have you ruining my fun, Dr. Lecter."

“Cheeky boy.” Hannibal pauses to follow the swipe of the knife across Mason’s upper lip. “Is your meal satisfactory?”

Mason says, “My compliments to the chef.”

“God thrives on praise of His works.”

“I’m running out of meat.”

Will ignores him in favor of turning Hannibal over to unbuckle the straps. Hannibal hisses without meaning to as the pressure is released from the brand on his back.

“Sorry,” says Will, shushing him. “If I’d known—”

“I would have volunteered.” Will’s hands stop moving as Hannibal echoes his own words. “If you had told me you needed bait, I would have agreed to whatever you wanted to do.”

Mason fills the silence with unintelligible jabbering; it serves as the movement of the chains on Hannibal and Will’s porch swing. “It seemed more prudent to do it my way.”

“Even Steven, once more?”

Will kisses Hannibal’s cheek as he helps him sit up. “Absolutely.”

“I assume you’ve freed me because you want my help.” Hannibal stretches his arms, wincing again as it pulls on the skin of his back. He hates and loves this in equal measure, being so weak around Will.

“Yes.”

“And?”

“Show me how to snap his neck without killing him.”

Hannibal blinks. “Why shouldn’t you kill him?”

“Because total paralysis is worse.”

His frown deepens. “There’s nothing wrong with being paralyzed.”

“There is when your long-suffering sister is destined to be your caretaker.” Will nods his head toward Mason—or rather, beyond him.

Margot emerges from the darkness.

“Ah. I don’t suppose you’d care to be of assistance?” Hannibal asks her.

“That makes me an accessory to a crime,” she says as she walks over, “but I suppose I’ve been worse.”

They haul Mason to his feet, leaving Margot to hold him up. Hannibal places Will’s hands on Mason’s neck, his back to Hannibal’s front—there’s no way to deny how aroused he is, not with his body on full display and his groin pressed against Will’s ass. Will doesn’t mention it, simply lets

Hannibal move his hands until Mason's neck cracks and he slides from Margot's embrace, boneless.

"Oops." Margot gives them a rare smile. "I'm such a klutz." She looks around Will, stepping around her brother. "You could use some clothes, Dr. Lecter."

"Indeed. But there's one thing I have yet to understand."

"Hmm?" Will pushes back, placing the majority of his weight on Hannibal's chest.

"Won't Mason simply turn you in when the time comes?"

Margot's smile grows. "Will told me he knows an excellent hypnotherapist."

"And you'll need a good therapist to get past the trauma of finding your brother like this, mauled by hungry boars." Will looks down at Mason, crumpled at his feet. "A pity his personal doctor went rogue."

"Isn't it just." Margot kicks at Mason's head.

"Yes," says Hannibal, arms tightening around Will. "I find it just, indeed."

Hannibal's surprised when they arrive at Will's house in Wolf Trap, further still when no dogs run out to greet them.

"Alana adopted my pack," Will explains from the front seat before Hannibal has the chance to ask. "I told her what happened, more or less."

"I can't imagine that was easy for you to do."

"No, but it was necessary." Will turns off the engine, thumping the back of his head against the headrest. "I may have also implicated you in the process, but don't worry, I also killed you off." When Hannibal says nothing, Will keeps going. "I told her you'd set up everything, like Mason tried to convince me, and she'd already been mostly persuaded you were the Chesapeake Ripper, so it wasn't far-fetched."

Hannibal comes as close to being offended as he ever has. "A proclivity for murder does not a rapist make."

"Tell that to the collective human conscience. Anyway, I told her I'd devised a plan with Margot to kill two birds with one stone—she wasn't okay with that, at first. But then I shared what Mason had done to Margot, and to children, and that he always got away with it because he had money. The only way to stop either of you was to kill you both."

"Alana made herself a willing accessory?" Pushing up to sit irritates Hannibal's back and makes breathing difficult. "This all seems too convenient."

“She’ll figure it out eventually, but by that point she’d be implicating herself, not to mention her patient.” Will cranes his head to look at Hannibal. “I referred Margot to her.”

“Sensible.”

“I like to think so.” He opens the door of his station wagon. “Come on. Let’s get you patched up.”

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Pestilence and Famine departed on a morning flight, lifting off from Baltimore-Washington International, accompanied by two dogs and more affection than Abigail could handle.

“I don’t even let *Chiyoh* hug me this much,” she told Will, but she was smiling. “Seriously, Will, it’s not like you’re never gonna see me again.”

Will held her closer. “It’s happened once already. Better safe than sorry.”

Abigail had hugged Hannibal, too—“Oh my god, you’re such a green-eyed monster.”—but not for nearly as long. As far as Chiyoh, she did nothing more than shake his hand.

“I don’t like Will,” she said, “but I don’t like you, either, so I suppose it doesn’t matter.”

“We don’t always choose our family,” said Hannibal. “Our family chooses us.”

Chiyoh pursed her lips. “I don’t like his hair, either. Nor yours—too short and too long.”

Hannibal dismissed her with a glare of his own, segwayed with ease. “Please, take care of our Abigail.”

“Why should I protect my protege any less than you protect yours?” Chiyoh almost laughed. “Then again, we have very different definitions of protection.”

And he had no argument to make.

“I’ve grown accustomed to the quiet.” Bedelia poured Hannibal a glass of wine, the two of them standing on the porch of what once was Will’s house. “Now that the dogs are gone, even moreso.”

Hannibal watched Will, standing out in the field, looking back at the house. “I’m grateful he’s only kept two.”

“Which means you’re grateful for what happened.” Bedelia placed the bottle down on the porch rail with more force than necessary. “That’s monstrous, even for you.”

“I’m not grateful for what happened, but I can’t deny being pleased at the outcome.”

“Does Will know of your pleasure?”

Hannibal considered her question, pondered as he drank his wine, waiting for Will to tire of looking at his ship and treading water in his ocean and return to dry land.

Bedelia offered Will a glass as soon as his foot hit the first stair, and then asked him the same. “Did you gain meaning from your pain? Have you grown to appreciate any of your experience in some small way?”

Will took as long as Hannibal to make up his mind. “It bridged the final canyon between Hannibal and me. I learned there were worse ordeals to experience, and that I could survive them.”

“With help,” added Bedelia. “Hannibal is your crutch.”

“No.” Will clinked his glass against hers. “He’s my tourniquet.”

“So you’ve found religion.”

Will shook his head. “I found a fire to walk through and a hell to rise from.”

“I want to fuck you,” Will said, and Hannibal nearly slipped in the shower. “I want you to put down your fancy-ass soap and get your actual fancy ass into the bedroom.”

Hannibal’s hair still had conditioner in it. Will kept his glasses on.

“I just want to see it from the other side. I need to—” Will’s voice broke. “I need to see someone enjoying it.”

So he taught Will, guided his hands as he always had. “We don’t need lubricant,” said Hannibal, already breathless with only the tip of Will’s finger inside him—the idea of it overwhelmed his senses. “It isn’t necessary.”

“They didn’t use it, either, and it *hurt.”*

Hannibal held him close, whispered nonsense into his hair. “Because they wanted it to hurt, darling,” and more comfort and praise in languages Will couldn’t possibly have known.

“I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for.” He kissed the top of Will’s head, his ear pressed against Hannibal’s chest. “Nothing here. Nothing, at all.”

Will clung to him, nails digging into Hannibal’s arm. “What if I’m never ready?”

“It’s no matter.” The bed became the soft grass mats they’d woven together for the stone floor of their mandapa. He eased Will’s glasses from his face, though he loved to see them there. “I know you in ways no one else ever could. I’ve seen you victorious, covered in the blood of your enemies. That is enough. It’s all I’ve ever wanted: to share this life with you.”

“And the next?”

“Should God allow it,” Hannibal promised, “but if not, I will find you, regardless.”

“Some of our stars will always be the same, won’t they?”

“Yes,” and he wiped the tears from Will’s cheek before wiping his own.

They visit the catacomb one last time so Will can place a skull, his first supervised kill, alongside the others. He labels it in his characteristic scrawl: “Here lie the last of them.”

Hannibal stows Chiyoh’s rifle and Abigail’s crossbow behind the rest of their luggage. Will takes his place at the helm, and Hannibal sits beside him, the wind whipping through his long hair.

They leave the Chesapeake behind them with the taste of Cordell in their mouths, and set off for the new world.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for not only reading, but for joining me on this journey. Here's to our own little Murder Family! <3

End Notes

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